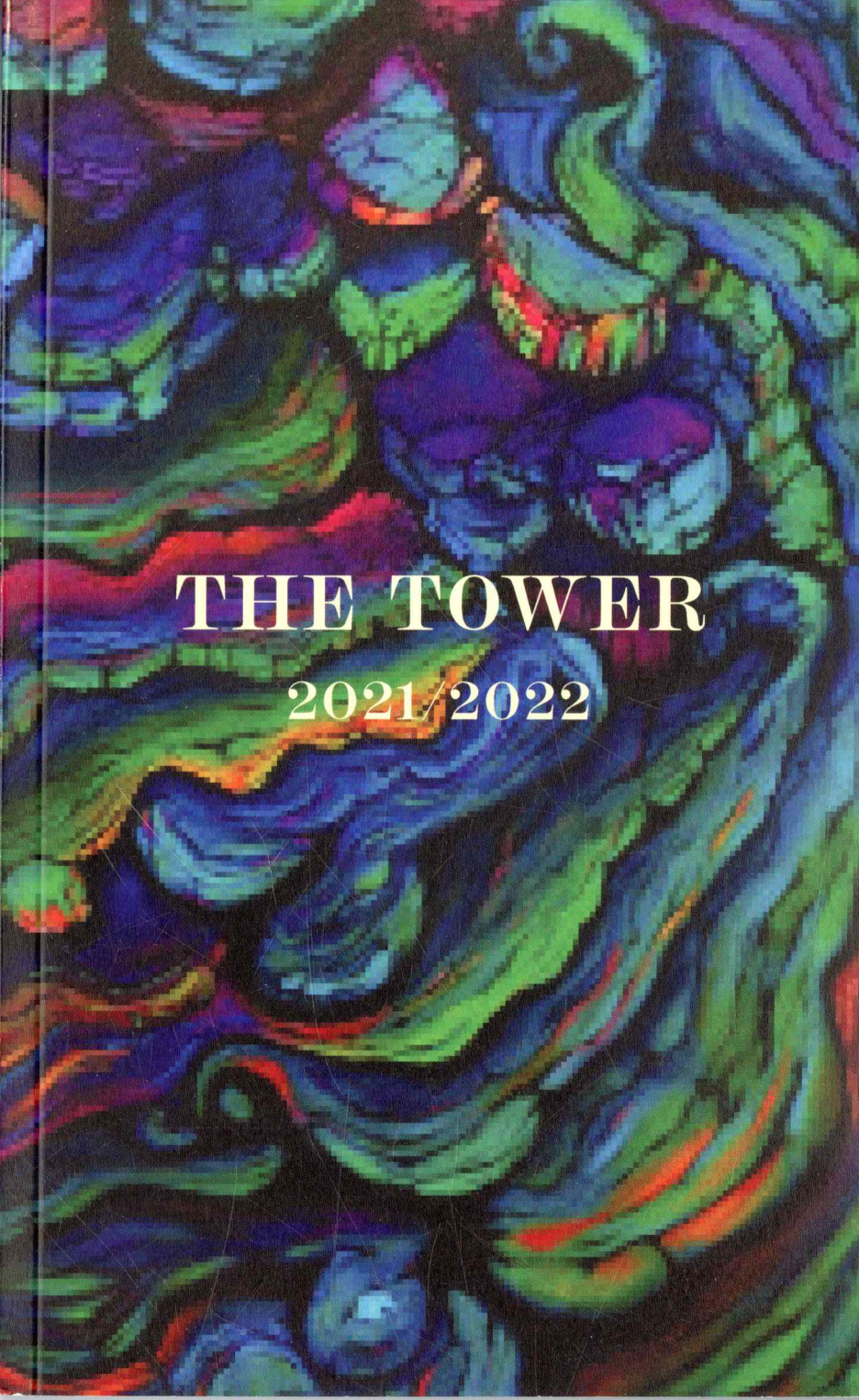
THE TOWER
2021/2022

The Tower

University of Montevallo

2021/2022

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

It has been a pleasure to work with such a hardworking, talented staff in my senior year of Montevallo. The memories I hold for The Tower are bittersweet as the year draws to a close. I hope you look into our magazine with nostalgia and fondness as much as we do.

Deidre Darby

Editor-in-Chief

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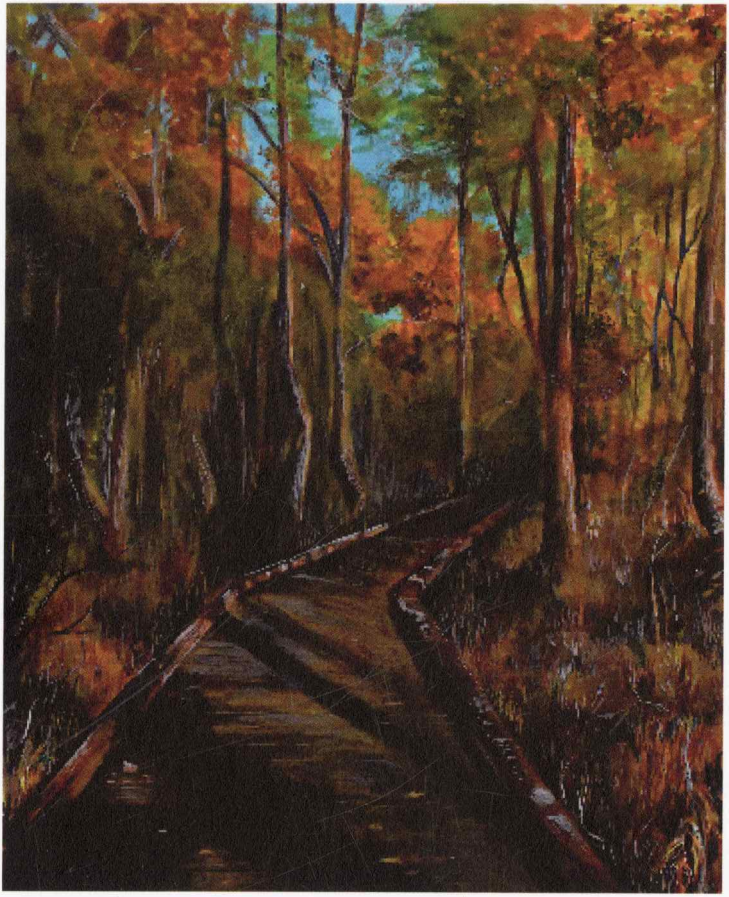
Grateful

Elle Brown

I am grateful for the moss today,
that resilient green carpet which clings
to whatever semi-rough surface it wishes.
I ponder on my fingerprints.
a physical mark that makes me, me
a way of saying
"I was once here too!"
Their ridges and curls reminiscent of trees
(furthering my belief we are all made
of the same things)
it's easy to forget where we came from.
It's easy to forget this earth
will one day call us back home.
But for now I am above ground
and full of love, full of hope
taking care to wipe the foam
from my muddy dog's nose,
sneezing from the chase of chipmunks and skunks.

I am noticing the little things.
A headache means I am alive,
and a heartache means I can feel love.
When watching the sun peeking through clouds
feels as if it's not enough
I remind myself now that sleeping on the couch
feels like a vacation,
thinking about the way I stayed there
on childhood sick days
slurping popsicles while my mother
sang away my belly aches,
appreciating the way my grandparents
say my name the same
every single time I walk through that front door.
A day will come which they will not say it
but for now I am with them
and my grandfather's voice sounds
how sea salt chocolate tastes,
melting, soothing with a little bit of a pinch.
That taste has been life for some of us.
That has been life for me.



Swampland Study
Natalie Henderson

Unending Green

Noah Wortham

Unending Green

Beyond the dark expanse

Fill in the blank void

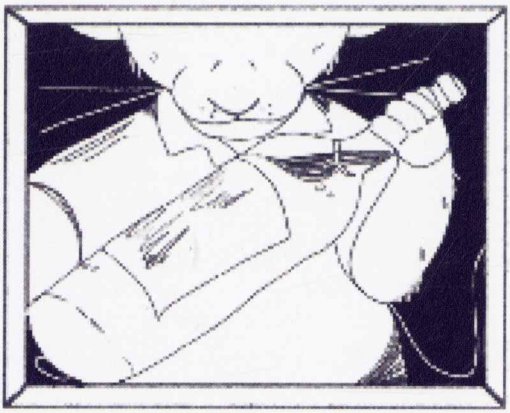
A path not yet written

Fear of the unknown?

Or the fruit of a future not yet sown.

Dandelion and Yew

Rose Davis



It was late summer, when the river ran high and everything green seemed to ease into slumber. The fieldmice would spend the last few weeks gathering the last pick of the seasons harvest and preparing the next. Of course, you would not know them as I, very few have the pleasure of meeting them these days. They were storytellers, beasts that lived for a good tale, of heroes and giant serpents that are struck down with mighty swords or magic that made the air feel alight with thunder!

However, very few of them ever wanted to leave their little hovels; much less their communities, which they considered every member of part of their family. They were small beings, the tallest one ever known coming up to your thigh. They had thin little tails, soft four-fingered paws, snouts that were perfect for peeking around corners, and rectangular front teeth made for chewing on seeds, grain, and all the other pleasantries of a simple life. Simply put, there were no better people to have for tea or for a nice festival in town square.

It was a deep valley where they lived, sandwiched between two great mountain ranges bushy from the forests that teemed with life both magical and strange. Of course, to the fieldmice they were neither, only annoying when they would dig up fields for the roots or steal into stores for a bite to eat when they didn't want to bother with hunting.

However, two of the mice remained elsewhere. At that late time the sky was a melting gradient of orange and pink, the sun but a jewel sinking into the trees. It's fading light cascaded their shadows into impossible lengths.

Yew's snout peeked through iron bars, his whiskers twitching in the afternoon breeze. "Hey, hey Dandelion!"

Dandelion Gildergrin Gentlebrooks' golden fur sparkled in the low light, the color of freshly dried straw. The mouse stood with his back to the bars, rigid, far too rigid for a proper guard. He lacked armor, only cloth herders wear, and the solitary tool on him were keys.

"Come on, hey! Talk to me, Dandy!" Yew squeaked. His soft pink paws clutching at the unpolished metal. The dull lamplight from the lantern beside the cage made his brown fur look rougher than it rightly was. "Give a poor thief his last remarks!"

Dandelion's almond shaped eye peeked over his shoulder. "I'm not supposed to talk to ya', silver tongue." It was an expression far too serious for the mouse. It looked like it would crack at any moment into a childish imitation, with pouted lips and furrowed brow until his eyes would look like small black pebbles.

Yew clicked his tongue. He pressed his feetpaws against the bars, a pitiful attempt to lounge in the cage that was barely large enough to support his rump, much less a whole fieldmouse body. It was made for pests, not thieves. "Nonsense, nonsense, you, of all mice, not talkin' to your friend Yew? Do the summers of the wild oak mean nothing to you? The winters of mulled ale? Oh forego the thought! My heart would break if such a friend was mine!" He sighed, rubbing his head, "Alas, my final words will not be heard by my dear golden apple!"

He scrambled as Dandelions foot pushed the cage. It lurched and the iron lock on it crashed against the bars. The herder was only just larger than Yew, sturdied by the handling of livestock that tend to ram. "What do you want so bad if you're going to call me ya' golden apple?" Dandelion's eyes thinned. Who could forget the springs and autumns?

"Only to see my sweet fruit once again and plead! What crimes have I committed so much that I'm put inside this trap?" Yew cooed. It caused Dandelion's face to crack; the poor mouse was too kind for this job! Far too accustomed to sheep and a harvester's life than the life of a jailer. If only he hadn't had the shortest tail!

"Theft." The mouse stated. Yew clutched at his trouser leg as he tried to move away.

The thief pleaded, "But only for hunger sake! Do you punish the child crying for milk?" As he said this, his lithe little paws shot throughDandelion's pockets for a key! However, nothing could be found except the grip of Dandelion's paw around the wrist. He pulled Yew's hands out with far too much mundanity.

"You do when the babe has plenty of food at his home or mine, or when it is wine not milk." Dandelion stated, in quite a different tone, "It still stains your shirt; it almost suits you."

"You do when the babe has plenty of food at his home or mine, or when it is wine not milk." Dandelion stated, in quite a different tone, "It still stains your shirt; it almost suits you."

"You think so?" Yew said, simple joy marking his face as he pulled at his tunic. It was a dark green, the dark purple shooting through the middle of it like a valley. In truth, it did. He could not help adding, "You have said purple looks far better on me."

Dandelion nodded. He adjusted the lantern, the flickering little flame in it turning into a nice dancing column that let out a solid circle of light with only a single turn. It made the glass of a bottle nearby swirl with white. The wind of the late afternoon had turned into the warm breeze of a summer night. The darkness was kind, the type found in the rural countryside.

"I don't know what ya' expect to do if ya' get out of that cage" He observed," It wasn't much of a fuss, a bottle opened before it ripened."

"It's not mah' fault they use that ink that dries slower than the wine ages" Yew chided, "Besides, I plan to leave as any good thief does barring this little...interruption."

The herder gawked, hoping to see the little robbers face crack into a smirk. However, none came.

"Not the valley?" He inquired.

Yew answered heartidly, "The very valley."

Dandelion pressed his face against the cage's bars. His paws became stained with ink, hidden in the dark iron color. "Ya' can't leave without permission from' da' elders, ya' ass!"

"I can and I will. You could come with me, Dandy." Yew stated, flicking the other mouses whiskers idly. "You should. Perhaps you'll be my muscle, or become a knight, or even my knight. Perhaps we go to a city and peek in their windows to see-" He was interrupted with a shaking of Dandelion's head.

"No, Yew." He said sadly, poking his snout through the bars until it touched Yews. His nose twitched, Dandelion smelled like grass and hay. Perhaps honey. "I'm not like ya'. I'm a farmer, a herder! I'm not a knight riding a horse, or a charming rogue, or someone who delves into dusty old dungeons looking for chalices or whatever those people do! I'd rather not poke my snout anywhere a city is, whatever or whoever it happens to be."

Yew began, "Nonsense, nonsense, you're perfec-". The lock hit the ground with a dull thud. "I would appreciate you stop interruptin' me, seedhead" Yew said, scowling.

"I know not to let you finish a word. You lead me too easily into your little stories and I'll lose track of time." Dandelion replied, pulling Yew out of the cage by the scruff of his neck and shoving the purple-hued bottle under his arm. It was sweet blueberry wine, made only last spring. The ink on the paper label had smudged, leaving it with a blur of black and blue as its name. "Besides, I know you too well, far too well. I'd rather see you off myself, then hear you disappeared the next night without a goodbye. No respect for manners, none at all."

Yew's mouth opened and then closed. He looked up at the taller mouse, the lanterns light making Dandelion's fur glow. He grinned at Yew, a sad one but one regardless, "I'll catch up to you, at some point my friend. Perhaps I'll hear about you being in trouble and run off to save you." Dandelion said, "Go on, before it's too dark to see now."

Yew grabbed the collar of Dandelion's shirt, dragging the poor mouse into a smooch. Wherever it was on the lips, the nose, or the cheek is not my place to say, nor yours to know. The little thief released him and scampered off into the foliage with barely a sound. "Don't make me wait too long then!" echoed amongst the darkening trees along with wishes of future health and delighted squeaking.

Dandelion was frozen stiff. The reliable sound of crickets started to replace the chorus screech of cicadas. The off circle of lamplight where Dandelion stood in the growing night felt like the whole world.

Skeletons
Elle Brown

Skeletons

Elle Brown

We all have skeletons in our closet.
It's safe to assume that I'm the skeleton in yours.
See, my skeletons are a bit different.
The bones are broken, rat bitten,
over 4 years worth of decomposition,
shattered into tiny pieces
where I broke them apart
with agony, tears
on grey therapy couches,
I pulled them out into the world
and finally laid them to rest.
Only shards remain.
But yours?
Fresh,
less skeleton, more corpse,
somewhere in between
bloat,
and wet rot.

Did you really think bodies reach
dry decay in places like these?
They don't.
Not really.
No, their bones stay wet, almost supple
the skin slips, cementing itself into
every carpet fiber, every crevice.
Their insides will bubble
as wasps and bot flies make their homes
and moss grows, stretching over rib cages
like cobwebs in untouched spaces.
You see,
in places like these? People never really die,
not really.
And while no one else will think about
what you did to me,
I will
and you will.
Because I'm the one you'll never talk about.
At least not by name.

Silence

Skylar Bailey

Birth and Death sat side by side under a tree on the edge of a rushing river.

"You should be worshipping me," said Birth, "for if I did not exist, you would not exist. Every breath you take is because of me. I give you purpose."

Death thought for a moment before responding. "Indeed, that is true. I, however, give you purpose as well. If I did not take what you gave, there would be no space for you to keep giving, and no need. Perhaps you should be worshipping me."

The two sat in silence, Birth watching the fish swim in the river and Death examining the dry leaves on the ground.

The sun soon set, leaving the two sitting alone in the dark. Death was the first to break the long silence. "Look at how brightly the stars shine tonight."

Birth nodded in agreement before making an observation of their own. "Yes, and feel how cool the breeze is."

Death nodded, and the two sat in silence once again until the sun rose.

This time, Birth was the first to speak. "The morning sun has spread such beauty throughout the sky, wouldn't you agree?"

Death looked up to the sky. "Ah, yes, almost as beautiful as the morning lark's song."

Birth looked up at the branches and found many birds, fluttering and singing.

Again, they sat in silence, this time for three days. They each observed components of night and day, picking out the beauty in each, but never speaking a word of it.

At noon on the fourth day of their silence, Life found them under the tree and sat between them. "You are both so quiet. Why aren't you speaking to one another?"

The only answers given were shrugs.

"Do you not appreciate each other's company?"

Still, no comments were made.

Life took one of Birth's hands in theirs, and one of Death's hands in the other. "Please, siblings. We are connected. We are the beginning, the middle, and the end. The rise and set of the sun and the moon, the stars and the breeze and the music in between. There is necessity and beauty in each of us. We need one another." Life let go of their hands and stood up. After giving them a wink, Life walked into the river and slowly sank into the water.

Birth asked, "Did you take Life?"

Death shook their head. "No, I did not take them. Life is still here, I'm just not sure where."

The two returned to their empty state of silence.

Three more days passed, and Life had not yet returned.

"Should we worry? Should I begin to repair a replacement?" Birth asked.
Death replied, "No, it is not their time. Do not make a replacement, not yet."
Birth thought for a moment, and said "Tell me when you are ready to take, and I shall be ready to give once again."
Death, with a smile, replied "I will, dear friend. Thank you." This time, there were only a few moments of silence between them before Birth spoke again.
"I guess we need each other."
"Yes, I suppose we do."
And the two sat in silence.

Blooming Life
Atiyah Muhammad

Gastronomy
Natalie Henderson

Greybat
Erika Lewis

Superposition

Windy Cooke

I walk in duplicity
Tripping over the same bricks
I always did,
But these sidewalks are not the same.
No one can see me now.
I no longer see the faces that belong in the crowd.
My own face does not make sense.
My timeline, in knots,
Pulls me here -
Tells me to look in another box.
Standing on tiptoes, I reach
To take them down from their shelves.
I open them all, looking
For the one where the contents, once observed,
Tell a better story...
The one which holds a present
Untouched by decades.
The old bell chimes in the distance
Announcing that another hour has passed.

The Ring of the Forgotten

Noah Wortham

The Ring of the forgotten

She carved it from the grove

Bestowed it upon her own

It was lost by men

Reclaimed by none

It awaits the chosen

Those under the sign of Ragnarök

Whose teeth shall bare

For the remaining heir.

Everything and Nothing

Celine Smith

Devyn is pretending to sleep. He agonizingly focuses on the task of having his eyelids cover his shifting orbs for eight hours straight to mimic a task that is a necessity in his old world but not this new one. Tears fall from the corner of his eyes to his ears as he lays down corpse-like, his hands are clasped like a pious priest over his belly. Every night he regrets his decision, but its resolution happens tomorrow. The alarm embedded in him goes off and stops when he slowly unveils his eyes. He gets up and brushes his teeth, chasing away cavities that will never come, washes his skin of nonexistent grime and stink, and brushes his already uniform hair. As he brushes his hair, he truly takes himself in the mirror and thinks back to his life Before. Where toothpaste is not affordable and baking soda is its substitute and how the showers are perpetually cold because he cannot afford his gas bill, and he must perform his own haircuts because he cannot waste money on such luxuries.

Now he has access to all the amenities he can no longer dream of, but they are for show like a plastic wrapped couch. With a simple thought his work clothes appear on his body and he is out the door. It is five in the morning here but who knows what time it really is. The sun is just starting its arc across the sky casting a pale-yellow golden hue across the cloudless dome as he starts on his hour long walk. He does not perspire, his muscles do not ache, and his heart does not quicken underneath his sternum. With a simple thought he could teleport to work but walking makes him feel more natural. He drifts along the sidewalk passing by houses all chaotically different and incongruent, McMansion next to brownstone next to cottage, next to condo. On the opposite of the street are archetypal rolling hills.

In the Before there is no greenery, it is all drab dirty gray cement, the only green are the weeds choking in between the seams of the concrete. The apartment complex is a humongous gray box with slits for windows that ominously resembles the county jail not too far away. In fact, on occasion buses stop to drop off inmates only to realize they are a few miles away from their true destination.

The hate he holds for that place melts into a yearning. Now he loathes the oasis that holds him captive but thankfully his sentence is almost up. The tall glass spire that is his workplace is suddenly in front of him and if it were not for the Departure tomorrow his sense of despair would be exponentially worse. There are no elevators or stairs, as he walks onto the obsidian floor the lobby melts and reforms to his floor. His floor is a maze of cubicles of workers already jacked in. Arms slack at

their sides, eyes icy and glowing blue, lips slack holding no emotions. No need for computers, Devyn thinks, you already are one. He sits at his cubicle and presses the white circle at his table, and he becomes like everyone else.

Devyn is a Bitcoin converter, he spends hours completing the transactions for buyers, selling bitcoins for sellers, translating bitcoins into yen, pesos, pounds, euros, and dollars. He processes so many numbers a day they become valueless. He is what wires funds from one account to another, applies insufficient funds fees, and notifies Bitcoin users when the value is falling or increasing.

In the Before he is a factory worker making solar panels. He only holds a high school diploma, but with a quick upload of a program to his software he is able to carry out the tasks he is given today. After a blur and flurry of numbers he is done. With an electrical jolt, the clearest sensation experienceable here, he is yanked out. His coworkers mill about and talk to one another a rumble of chatter that is normally not present after a shift. His friend Richard comes by with a wide grin almost pixelating at the edges. His teeth are so white and big, Devyn wonders what his teeth look like in the organic world. Maybe his flawless orifice reflects his chipped, yellow, and crooked teeth in the Before. Devyn hates himself for his callous judgement. Richard pulls Devyn away from his negativity as he says, "Tomorrow is the day, Brother." They clasp hands and hug tightly both seeking the familiar warmness that comes with hugs, but it does not come as usual.

Devyn says simply, "I can't wait."

"Maybe I can meet you on the other side. Where did you say you're located again?"

"Birmingham, Alabama."

"Oh, I've never been to the south. Ya know I've never travelled out of Philadelphia. But now with the pretty bounty we've acquired from working here we can travel the world." Richard's face is pure wistfulness, he is far away floating in the imaginary which is also the real. He comes to and asks, "You still walk to and from?"

"Yeah."

"Let's walk together," Richard says excitedly.

"Alright." This is the first time in five years that Richard has made this offer. Devyn is pleased to have someone to walk him and keep him from turning internally.

On the sidewalk they are quiet and awkward. Richard kicks a pebble while they walk. They slowly drag themselves to the row of houses. They look at anything to seem occupied.

"Everything feels wrong huh." Richard is the one who breaks the silence. Devyn looks over to him scared because for the first time someone is

car to stretch. He yearns to feel his irritated bladder screaming at him to take a leak.

All these miniscule things they want fill up their walk. Devyn's house comes first. Devyn walks up to the doorstep and turns around and waves to Richard standing behind the white picket fence. Richard does a simple arc of his hand but before walking off asks, "Are you going to the party tonight?"

Devyn scrunches his face and nods his head, "Of course." Richard nods back and walks away.

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The party is held in a warehouse placed on one of the many random idyllic hills. From outside Devyn can see the lights shifting to neon color after neon color. The bass from the music can be heard from a good distance and Devyn lightly smiles. When he enters he is immediately smushed. The warehouse is just big enough to contain everyone who's here and it looks like just about everyone who is on the Server is here tonight. Devyn cannot help but think about the missing heat from the mass of bodies. A list of missing human details run through his head, so he stops himself so he can enjoy the moment. He begins turning in a tight circle surveying the multitude to look for Richard to no avail. Finding Richard is literally like looking for a needle and haystack and Devyn quickly gives up. While music is playing most people opt to listen to their own music inside their head. Nearly everyone is out of sync dancing to their own rhythms. Some even sing out loud, creating a grating noise. Devyn turns on his own music and turns it up, so he no longer hears anything else. He closes his eyes and sways softly to the music back and forth. Someone purposefully grazes his upper arm, and he smiles thinking its Richard but is stunned to see someone he does not recognize.

A woman stands in front of him with long billowy curls. Her party outfit consists of shiny red pants and a lacy black top. Devyn's eyes slightly widen at the sight of her. In a world where people can modify themselves to look their best, she still takes his breath away. She is a true Artie, a person who fully accepts that this plane is man created and portrays herself in the least realistic way as possible. Her eyes take up too much space on her face, her pupils are slit shaped like a snake. Her ears are slightly pointed like an elf. On each side of her temples are a tattoo of a pair of butterfly wings.

"What song are you listening to." She states this rather than asks and grabs a hold of his hand connecting to him. When she speaks Devyn notices her tongue is forked. She turns into him, and her eyes are shut, and she sways back and forth. Her eyes glow a white blue and he knows she is looking at her interface. "This song is really old. My grandma wasn't even born yet when this was made. How do you know it?" She looks at him strangely as if him knowing old music is a sign of bad character.

saying what he always thinks. Richard reads his face as a sign to keep going. "The way the grass doesn't move with the sun. How the little dipper and big dipper have stayed in the same position since we got here."

Devyn cracks open like an egg and his yolk and whites slipping out quickly. "There are no bugs. I dug deep holes in the hill and there are no worms. It rains and the sky darkens but there are never any clouds. Even the dogs and cats we are allowed to have bark and meow so sporadically it's like they forgot they can do it.

Things don't taste right. Chocolate merely tastes sweet, so you have to eat three candy bars to feel satisfied. The coffee just tastes bitter, so you have to drink a whole pot to fully experience a cup. You never get a stomachache, but you feel a phantom of sickness." Richard nods his head so fast in agreeance it seems like he's malfunctioning.

"If it weren't for the pot of gold at the end of this journey, I would call this hell." Richard's chest heaves up and down with frivolous breaths.

Devyn thinks, and we signed up to be here. Like his mother believes in Christ to take her to heaven Devyn believes in humans and is sent to purgatory. He wishes he could shake himself and prevent his past self from making this awful decision, but it is too late. And he is almost done but that does not prevent Devyn from feeling a huge loss of time, five whole years here where he is everything and nothing.

Devyn, Richard, everyone here is a computer coded version of themselves. A confusing cacophonous blend of artificial intelligence and human where the beginning and end of the two aspects are so gray it is inseparable like dark and light grains of sand. An amalgamation of their brains, memories, and programs to help them complete the tasks of algorithms. Their organic forms lay in cryo-pods in some non-descript facility. Tomorrow they will be downloaded off this server and back onto earth. When Devyn gets back, he plans on decimating his liver with alcohol and picking a fight. He feels exhilarated to experience pain again. He hopes he gets punched in the mouth so every time he opens it his gum wounds open up again painfully stretching as it tries to heal. Devyn wants to take ice cold baths, and eat foods he hates like salt and vinegar chips, he wants to stay up for 24 hours straight. Then he wants to take a hot shower, the temperature just right so that the heat slightly bites at his skin. He wants to eat his favorite desert, the orange flavored pound cake his mother makes only during the summer. And then he wants to sleep in until the afternoon. And all these mundane tasks seem like saccharine sweet dreams.

Richard is in a comfortable silence beside Devyn. Richard like Devyn is dreaming of filling up his passport with stamps and taking days long road trips. He thinks of not driving just in the states but traveling all the way from Philadelphia to the tip of South America and back. He wants to feel the ache of his knuckles from the vibration of the steering wheel. He wants to get to feel the warm pull of muscles when he gets out of his

car to stretch. He yearns to feel his irritated bladder screaming at him to take a leak.

All these miniscule things they want fill up their walk. Devyn's house comes first. Devyn walks up to the doorstep and turns around and waves to Richard standing behind the white picket fence. Richard does a simple arc of his hand but before walking off asks, "Are you going to the party tonight?"

Devyn scrunches his face and nods his head, "Of course." Richard nods back and walks away.

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The party is held in a warehouse placed on one of the many random idyllic hills. From outside Devyn can see the lights shifting to neon color after neon color. The bass from the music can be heard from a good distance and Devyn lightly smiles. When he enters he is immediately smushed. The warehouse is just big enough to contain everyone who's here and it looks like just about everyone who is on the Server is here tonight. Devyn cannot help but think about the missing heat from the mass of bodies. A list of missing human details run through his head, so he stops himself so he can enjoy the moment. He begins turning in a tight circle surveying the multitude to look for Richard to no avail. Finding Richard is literally like looking for a needle and haystack and Devyn quickly gives up. While music is playing most people opt to listen to their own music inside their head. Nearly everyone is out of sync dancing to their own rhythms. Some even sing out loud, creating a grating noise. Devyn turns on his own music and turns it up, so he no longer hears anything else. He closes his eyes and sways softly to the music back and forth. Someone purposefully grazes his upper arm, and he smiles thinking its Richard but is stunned to see someone he does not recognize.

A woman stands in front of him with long billowy curls. Her party outfit consists of shiny red pants and a lacy black top. Devyn's eyes slightly widen at the sight of her. In a world where people can modify themselves to look their best, she still takes his breath away. She is a true Artie, a person who fully accepts that this plane is man created and portrays herself in the least realistic way as possible. Her eyes take up too much space on her face, her pupils are slit shaped like a snake. Her ears are slightly pointed like an elf. On each side of her temples are a tattoo of a pair of butterfly wings.

"What song are you listening to." She states this rather than asks and grabs a hold of his hand connecting to him. When she speaks Devyn notices her tongue is forked. She turns into him, and her eyes are shut, and she sways back and forth. Her eyes glow a white blue and he knows she is looking at her interface. "This song is really old. My grandma wasn't even born yet when this was made. How do you know it?" She looks at him strangely as if him knowing old music is a sign of bad character.

He dumbly shrugs his shoulders. "My mom used to listen to it and..." He feels the importance leaving and notices how they sway together. He looks at her eyes and not only are they slit shaped, they are green and he begins longing for the greenery he rarely got to experience in the real world. Somewhere along the way her hands become draped around his neck and his hands settle on her hips and he hates this because he knows the coding is not doing human sensory justice. He knows his heart should be beating out of his chest and that his palms should be making the lace gummy with sweat. And he knows his stomach should be twisting like the loops of a rollercoaster but none of that is accompanied with this experience.

His disdain is interrupted by her. "Have you ever fried your chip?"

"Huh," he says trying to untangle her riddle.

"Have you ever fried your chip? You know, fucked around with your coding."

"No."

"Do you want to?" Her head tilts and her eyes swallow him whole.

"I mean...what's it do? How does it work?" He knows his answer, but he knows it's the smart thing to ask.

"Basically, you're hacking yourself. You scramble your coding and its kind of like getting high or drunk."

Devyn is skeptical. Not because he doesn't want to mess anything up but because he doubts it feels like anything close. "Yeah sure. But how is the damage not permanent?"

"Fail safes and such. When the code finds out something is wrong it automatically shuts you down rewrites it and then reboots you. Don't worry they wouldn't dare allow something to prevent us from working."

"Okay I'm down," he says simply. She links into him again, and they both look at his interface. She tinkers around until a black screen with strings of letters and numbers and dashes and such appears. Then she starts deleting and—

Cyan blue, the smell of roses, flashing lights, something is in ear, it sounds like a tornado warning. And for the first time ever he feels overwhelmed. His body feels like led. He feels like neon yellow. Nothing makes sense. And Devyn is so scared, and he is so happy that he is scared. He never wants it to end and then it does. He could have been out for a few hours or a few minutes he doesn't know. He comes to and the crowd is all facing one way. A hologram logo for Servant floats in front of the crowd.

He feels so disoriented. He glances around looking for her, but she is nowhere to be found. He wants to look for her, push through the masses until he finds her. He stays put though. He desperately wants to see her again, to get her information and find her in the real world. Just as he is

about to break out and search for her, the hologram of the CEO of Servant, Collin Phillips appears. He pays homage to Steve Jobs by donning a white turtleneck and jeans along with simple sneakers.

"Hello to the new mankind. You all are the future's frontiersman. You all are Neil Armstrongs. The first beings to convert themselves entirely to a digital platform. You also act as a symbol for me. You all are proof that all of my work did not go to waste."

"SHUT UP AND PUT US BACK IN OUR BODIES," someone shouts from the crowd.

Collin Phillips continues unfazed. It is a recording. "I would like to go through the historical events that led us to this pivotal moment in all of human history. In 2007 the UN announced that the world and its population had become more urban than rural. Now that sounds like a good thing. Collectively we were all coming into modern times. No one was thinking of the repercussions. With more people joining into modernity, we have more people with buying power. Many people called it the Continuation of the Roaring Twenties. Everyone had money due to investments in cryptocurrency." Devyn thinks to himself that he is excluded from that timeframe.

He does not remember having more buying power. "At our peak we forgot what happened after the Roaring Twenties. Instead of stocks crashing a new problem was created. It had always been there, lurking in minds of many through paranoia but now the problem could no longer be ignored. The mass amounts of cryptocurrency wreaked havoc on the forests and atmosphere. The unrenewable resources it took to manufacture mass amounts of servers contributed to a sizable amount of pollution as well as deforestation. Swaths of already rare untouched land had to be used to support this new economy. As mentioned before, the buying power increased which meant increasing demands on production across industries. And materials do not appear out of thin air. And thinner the air became.

"Our consumption became so bad that companies slowly started chipping at our beloved national parks, such as Yellowstone. With that came the extinction of our beloved animals. We also had to say goodbye to biodiversity."

What does this have to do with me?

Collin Phillips eyes begin to tear up. "Many began to ask. What is the point of buying all this stuff when one day we won't be able to use them? At this point many people were not willing to sacrifice their newly acquired life of luxury. What is one to do? The damage seemed to be irreversible. Switching to renewable energy would not be enough to fix the problems we created. How could we possibly salvage this insurmountable mess?"

"This is where I come in." He pauses for laughter and roaring applause to come, but it does not. "I found a way to combine the digital and the organic. I found a way to translate your existence to a fully formed being into a computer. But how does this solve our devastating environmental problems? If you will recall a couple of decades ago, the president of Mexico came up with the brilliant idea of offering work visas in the United States under the condition that they take jobs reforesting the United States of America. The plan was successful, it created jobs, the land began to recover but with the change of presidency in both countries the plan was pushed to the wayside. With that plan I ushered in the New Migration. People upload themselves onto the server doing the work of past algorithms with no training needed. The hybrid of the human mind and artificial intelligence helped fix the communication gap between technology and humans. People in poorer areas were offered their highest paying job here. The living conditions they had in the real-world lack in comparison to what's available in the Servant. I'm sure you would all agree that you were given access to a life you always wanted and more because your bodies are no longer limited to biological necessities."

At this point Devyn is no longer listening. The reframing of narratives is highly upsetting to him. He remembers being offered to upload himself on Servant. A thick packet in the mail with all the pros appears underneath the door of his apartment. How in the beginning it seems like you have a choice. He remembers deciding to stay on earth, but his apartment building gets bought out by Servant. Nearly everyone who lives in his apartment is living paycheck to paycheck, so merely relocating is nearly impossible. He remembers contacting his other friends and family that he could possibly stay with and them all facing a similar problem. It seems like Servant closes in on them forcing them into a corner where a trap door is located, and that trap door leads to here. Most poor people do not have enough money to own properties, everyone in his tax bracket faces house insecurity. Servant knows this. Servant bets on this.

The properties are torn down with land acting as a replacement. Infantile trees and swaths of flowers and bushes begin to encroach nearer and nearer to where he lives. He sees more greenery on his commute to work and at first it seems beautiful. But then after the incessant notices in the mail, the trees and such seem like vines, nature's decoration that slowly chokes him out.

And now he's here living Collin Phillip's technological wet dream which is Devyn's nightmare. Here is overwhelmed with the feeling of not being truly real. Living here feels like living in an overprotective bubble where nothing can affect him positively or negatively. It only takes him a few months to realize whatever he is doing on Servant is not

living. He feels mummified.

But soon he is returning home.

As if Collin reads his mind, he says, "I know you all are sitting on the edge of your seat to be put back in your bodies and be back home. Or maybe some of you are dreading coming back and have come to love the life you lead here." Many guffaws and sounds of discontentment roll over the crowd. "And I am absolutely sorry to say this." Devyn holds his unneeded breath. "Tonight, you will not be put back in your bodies." Someone throws a bottle at the hologram. It shatters against the wall. People begin to yell. "Again, I am sorry, we grossly underestimated how much damage the earth has undergone. Five years has barely made a dent. We never fully considered that all the plants we put in the ground wouldn't take and it would become much harder for them to survive in the first place due to the lack of land and pollution. We have made great progress, but not enough for you to return home. In fact it looks like you will have to stay here for a decade. Your wages will of course increase—"

Collin's words seem to warble in Devyn's ear as if he is in underwater. He cannot compute this fact. He is supposed to be getting uploaded into his body tonight but that is no longer happening. What he is agonizingly counting the days for is yanked away from him. Two steps forward three thousand six hundred and fifty steps back. And Devyn feels as though he is drowning, fruitlessly trying to push through the water to the surface and it is nowhere in reach. And his body remains calm. No speedy heart racing. Palms remain dry. His composure is still and yet he feels as if he is freefalling. Around him people weeps.

Especially the Greenies—people who have wealth in the real world but sacrifice it to save the world. Today is the day they are supposed to come back home and be greeted with a beautiful healthy and bountiful earth. That day is no longer here. It is pushed so far into the distance it might as well be invisible.

People around him sit down and hold themselves in fetal position. Rocking themselves back and forth and looking into the distance. Everyone is recalibrating their expectations of their lives. The way in which they are being treated seems like the biggest betrayal. Their decision again is taken away from all of them as if they are not humans but property of Servant. They are essentially stuck on another planet. He wonders if the people on earth care. If their absence is noticed. If people know about the injustice that takes place tonight. And it becomes crystal clear that Devyn does not sign up for a new life, he signs his life away unknowingly. Everyone here does.

***

Devyn no longer pretends to sleep at night. He lays on his side

looking out at the window as still as a corpse. He has not gone to work in days. He wastes hours by scrambling up his brain by butchering up his code to distract himself from his sentence. Richard sends him messages after messages. He even comes by the house everyday knocking on his door, but Devyn does not answer. No one and nothing can comfort him. He wonders if everyone is like him sitting at home and not doing work. Sadly, their presence is not missed on the other side. Old algorithms and plain old artificial intelligence do his work for him which only emphasizes that he does not matter. Phillip Collins asks, what's the point of buying a bunch of stuff when the earth is at it ends. But Devyn asks what is the point in investing in a future that he cannot take part in?

One day he tries to go to work. He even goes through his morning routine. He looks himself in the mirror and takes in his image. His dark skin has undertones of gray instead of russet red. Phillip Collins can upload him into a computer but cannot get his skin tone correct. Or maybe he doesn't care to, and this is what breaks him. The small flaw in his façade makes Devyn crumble. He lays down again and he begins to fry his chip.

Only this time he does not delete random parts. He begins deleting everything. He slowly unravels himself. And he begins to fade. He sees part of himself go missing, his memories, his passions, he dislikes, what he is fond of all disappears. He ignores the warning in his mainframe. The fragmented parts of him begin to panic. Fail safes come into place trying to protect himself from himself. But he is like a virus he deletes and demolishes everything himself. He selects chunk and swaths of data to delete. And while he feels himself becoming a wisp and sees himself disappearing, he never forgets to keep deleting everything. For a second, he forgets why he is doing this but that doesn't even stop him. That becomes his purpose. He feels himself circling the drain getting closer and closer till he is all gone and—

***

Jacob has the easiest gig in the world. He thinks this as he sips on his cappuccino. Sure, the uniform sucks. The scratchy polyester becomes highly uncomfortable especially because he sits for hours in it. It gets kind of warm where he works and when his skin becomes slick, the synthetic fabric gnashes against his skin. The collar feels like its choking him a bit as well and he would unbutton the top button, but his supervisor wants him to look spic and span. Jacob is willing to put up with strict dress code because for about eight hours a day he gets paid a hefty wage to play games on his phone.

Okay, fine. Technically he's supposed to be security for the cryo-bodies. But they kind of freak him out so he pays them little to no mind. Plus no one comes here anyway. It's like babysitting a pet rock. Sure, in the beginning religious radicals try to sneak in and tamper with

stuff but people have come to the realization that humans are moving toward a bodiless existence. Hell, there's barely anybody living on this rock anymore. So, Jacob sits and plays games on his phone or goes on his social medias. Every now and then he takes a phone call or two from some buddies of his. They want to go get drinks and Jacob is debating whether he wants to go out knowing he has work in the morning. While he does nothing here does he really want to be hungover and—

Thump. Jacob halts. It's not unusual for bumps and thumps to be heard in the facility. But this sounds a little different. More imminent. Usually, the sounds seem to be coming from the interior. Its quiet for a little and Jacob calms down a bit. Then it happens again. Thump. Thump. His stomach twists. It sounds like someone is banging on something. And while Jacob is security he is long out of practice and doesn't know what to do with himself.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Jacob looks to the panel of screens and tries to locate any movement. On the screens rows of bodies in vertical tubes float in nutritional fluid. Nothing seems out of place until. Holy shit. He makes a call to his supervisor. "Martin I'm gonna need you to come down."

His supervisor sighs. "What is it, Jacob?"

"I'm seeing something on the screen, and I don't know what to do about it. Its out of my pay range."

"Just wipe the screen, Jacob. You probably got a crumb on the glass again."

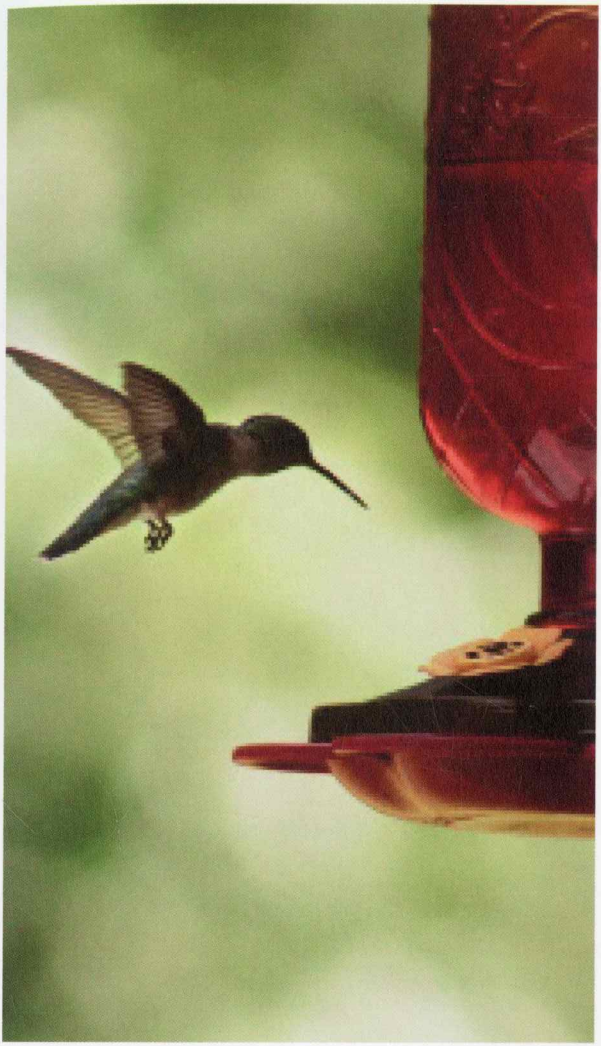
"No sir I can assure you it's not that." Jacob is racheting up.

"Then what is it describe the problem and I'll help you fix it I'm not coming down there though."

"I promise you I won't be able to fix it. One of the cryo-bodies is awake. His eyes are open and he's—he's banging on glass sir." It's quiet on the other end. "Sir he's alive he's coherent. I think he wants to get out." A long moment of silence.

"I'll be down there immediately."

Disturbance of Harmony
Natalie Henderson

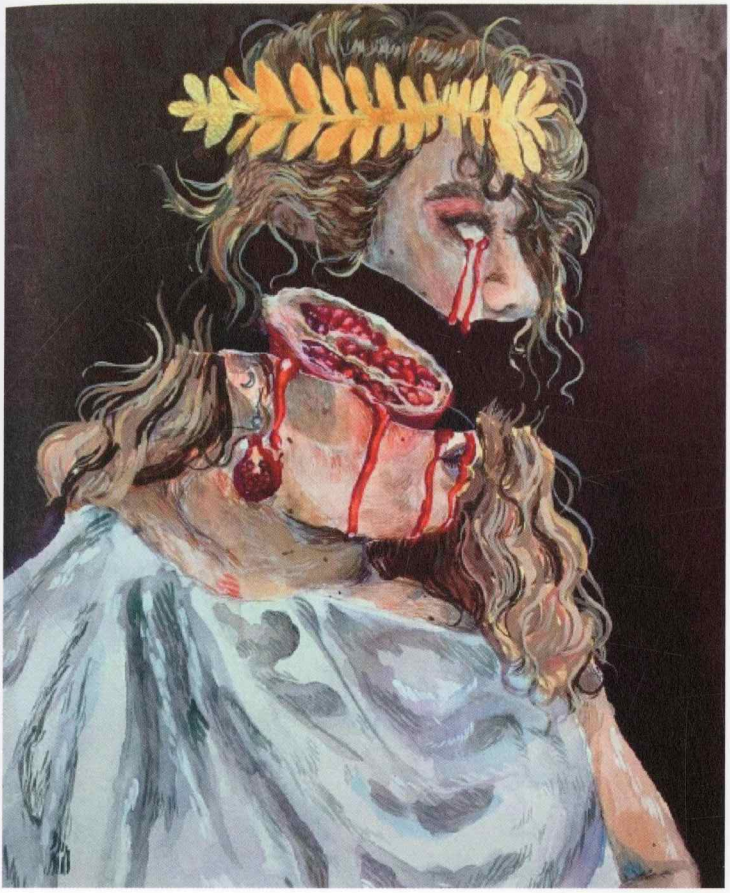


Untitled
Natlalie Jones

Medusa's Prayer

Kristen Bayles

O great Athena,
Warrior goddess, protectress of maidens,
Let my lips
Which have sung your praises each day
Never again be ravaged,
Let my eyes
Always raised to your shining image
Never again be filled with these tears of
Pain,
~~*Hatred,*~~
~~*Disgust,*~~
~~*Fear.*~~
Let my heart,
Which beats only for you,
Never again break in such agony.
Let my body,
A symbol of my dedication to you,
Never again be defiled.
May my lips drip venom,
Never again to be ravaged.
May my eyes be the death of those who dare gaze upon me,
Never again to be filled with tears.
May my heart turn to stone,
Never again to break.
May my body become a weapon,
Never again to be defiled.
And may my hair become deadly serpents,
To warn all who come near
That they shall never again do me harm.



Persephone
Isabella Ziglar

Matter of Time

Bell Jackson

Skulls
Arabella Cortes

Shadowy Spiral

Blaine Richardson

The shadows have been following the Man for a while now. He had noticed them a couple weeks ago, and after the initial realization and shock wore off, he wondered how long they had been following him. Did they just show up randomly one day? Maybe after he moved away from his hometown? Were they around when he still was living with his mom? Hell, were they there when he was born?

Had they just randomly moved in one day, or had they always been there and he had just never seen them?

He kept these thoughts to himself, didn't bother asking them any of the questions he had. He didn't know them well enough to ask them such questions. They might have not even realized he had seen them yet.

They did know a lot about the Man though. They knew every single thing about him, it seemed like. They followed him every step through every day of his life. They were in the corners of his room when he woke up, in the spaces between the seats of his car, hiding beneath his desk at work, just outside of his high beams when he drove home, where they followed him to every room of his house, watching him until he went to bed, where he had to confront them as they hid right underneath his eyelids. They were such a part of him, he started to wonder if his own shadow was working for them, or against him.

He knew they were watching him. They didn't have any eyes, but if anyone knew you didn't need eyes to be able to see, it was the Man.

At first, he was a bit startled, a little spooked by their sudden appearance or his sudden awareness, but now he didn't mind them, not anymore. The Man led a simple, boring life. It was the same routine everyday: Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep. If they wanted to watch that, he thought, more power to them. He didn't know what joys or sorrows he brought them with his routine. He wasn't going to break free of it, he already had admitted that to himself, and he figured if they were going to do something to him, they'd have done it by now. But they didn't, instead they just watched him go about his life: Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep. They were almost respectful about it. He would've been more appreciative if it weren't for the fact they took up residency in his home and life without asking him, but he stopped caring about that after a while. So, he continued about his routine, always being sure to note the shadows in their hiding places every day, to make sure they were still there and hadn't moved on, almost as if saying hi to them.

Every day they were there, in every spot he checked. They never took an off day, and they never left him alone. That is fine, he thought. I was getting a bit lonely anyways. It'll be nice to have something to join me on my daily routine through life, and have something to look forward to seeing. They can become a part of my routine, yet another thing to pay attention to.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep

He thought he noticed something, but shrugged it off. The shadows stayed still in the edges of his room and kept watching, almost as if they wanted to see his reaction.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep

Maybe... no, it's nothing, he was sure of it. Everything was just as it was. The shadows watched from the corners, and he went about his day. He wondered if he should tell someone about the shadows. But after he thought about it, he realized, who? There was no one he knew, at least, no one he knew well enough that would take his word for the shadows he was now seeing.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep.

No, no, there was definitely something. As he got up from his bed, he saw something from the corner of his eye, but what? He did a double take and looked again, but whatever was there he saw, it was gone now. He kept staring at the spot where he thought he saw something, as if he expected whatever it was to come back. It never did.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep.

He got out of bed when he saw the same thing out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't play dumb anymore. He had a sinking feeling and felt like if he kept pretending that he didn't know about the shadows, that it was going to end up badly for him.

He scoured the corner of his room. He didn't care anymore about whether or not the shadows knew he knew about them anymore, he had to see something for himself, had to convince himself he wasn't going crazy. He squinted at it, trying to get as clear of a look at it as possible through his morning haze, but despite shrugging it off before, he knew for sure something had changed now:

Slowly, the shadows had been getting bigger.

Not by a lot, maybe by only a hair of an inch, but sure enough he could tell they were just a bit bigger then they were before. Something you would only have been able to notice if you had been checking these shadows every day. He sat there, staring at the shadows in the corner, working it through his mind and processing it. Was it just the ones in his room? Had the shadows everywhere else been growing? Had they been growing all this time, and he just saw it? He pondered it all for a moment,

before he finally dropped the line of thought altogether. It didn't matter, he told himself. He turned around and left for work. The shadows in his car seemed to be a bit deeper than before as well, which at the very least answered one question of his, before he pushed away the thought yet again. When he got home, they followed him around, but as opposed to taking note of them, he tried to avoid looking at them for as long as possible. He succeeded until he finally had to close his eyes and go to sleep, where he saw that the shadows that hid under his eyelids had gotten just a tad bit darker.

He didn't care. He didn't know why he should just yet. And he didn't want to overreact.

What if he was imagining this growth? Hell, what if he had been imagining this whole thing? Yes, he told himself, that makes much more sense. The shadows are just shadows, and nothing more.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep.

The shadows seemed to take up more of the walls now. He told himself it was nothing and went about his day. went about his day.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep.

He sat down on the couch after a long day of work and felt his keys slip out of his pocket and heard them fall into the couch. When he reached out to grab them, he saw that it was pitchblack between the cushions. He didn't remember the place between the cushions ever being this dark.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep.

He walked inside his bedroom and flipped the lightswitch on, but instead of light filling the whole room, it only seemed to light up the ceiling. Did the light get dimmer? He made a note to himself to pick up a new and more powerful bulb on his way home from work tomorrow. It was a necessary purchase. He didn't much like sleeping in the dark anymore.

Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Go to sleep

He finished installing the new bulb and flipped the light on again. He saw the light come on, but the room didn't seem to get any brighter. He cursed himself for wasting money on something so trivial. It's all nothing, he thought. My light has always been this dim, I'm overthinking it.

However, when he went to sleep, he swore that the night sky out his window never seemed so black. The beauty of the stars were gone, the shadowy sky had suffocated them and whatever glistening light they had made.

Wake up.

He opened his eyes to see that the shadows had now covered his whole wall and window. He couldn't see out of the window anymore. That was okay. He didn't really want to look out the window anymore anyways, not after last night.

Go to work.

He got in his car and zoned out driving to work. Despite the sun being out and shining directly on him and the road, he still felt the grip of the shadows. They weren't watching him anymore. They were stalking him. Slowly, carefully, they were taking over his life.

Go home.

The drive home he could barely see anything, despite him having his high beams on the whole drive. It didn't matter. He usually zoned out during the drive to and from work anyways, and he made this drive so much he could do it with his eyes closed.

Go to sleep.

He closed his eyes and was met with pure nothingness. It wasn't even the blackest black, it was just nothing at this point. This was the only time in his routine when he welcomed the shadows, invited them to be with him and surrounded him with pure, blissful absence of everything. He was at peace.

Wake.

He woke up, but did he? He couldn't distinguish the difference between being awake or asleep anymore. Nothing felt real, and he felt groggy and slow. The nothingness that was in his sleep had appeared to follow him into waking life, as the shadows had covered more of the room than ever before. He wasn't sure whether that was a bad thing or not. All he knew was that the shadows were not the same nothingness in his sleep. The nothingness was blissful. The shadows were distracting and tiring.

Work.

Work? He couldn't trust himself to go to work. Images came to mind, pictures of him crashed, a heap of twisted metal and flesh, ran off the road and headfirst into a tree or a lamppost because he couldn't see the road in front of him, let alone focus on it. He decided to take a break from work for a few days. He convinced himself it was in his best interest. He was scared that he would die if he left home.

Home.

The walls felt closer than ever. He was crazy for calling this house a home anymore. The shadows that surrounded him and every room made them seem like they were closing in. He couldn't even remember how big his house used to be. His opinion on leaving changed. He had to get out of here and go somewhere, anywhere, but where would he go? The shadows followed his every step, there was no place he could go that they wouldn't follow him to. At least in this house he had food to eat and a place to sleep.

Sleep.

Was a brief respite from the nightmare of living. When he wasn't in bed, he longed to get back in it and go to sleep. But he knew that despite the break it gave him, it was still harmful to him. It took more and more effort to get up everyday, and some days he wished he didn't get up at all. He fantasized about falling asleep and never waking up, just being alone with himself and the solitude that the nothingness in his sleep brought.

How long had it been since he first noticed the shadows? He hadn't been counting the days and didn't own anything close to a calendar, but he couldn't even guess a general time frame. Has it been a couple of weeks? Months? A year?

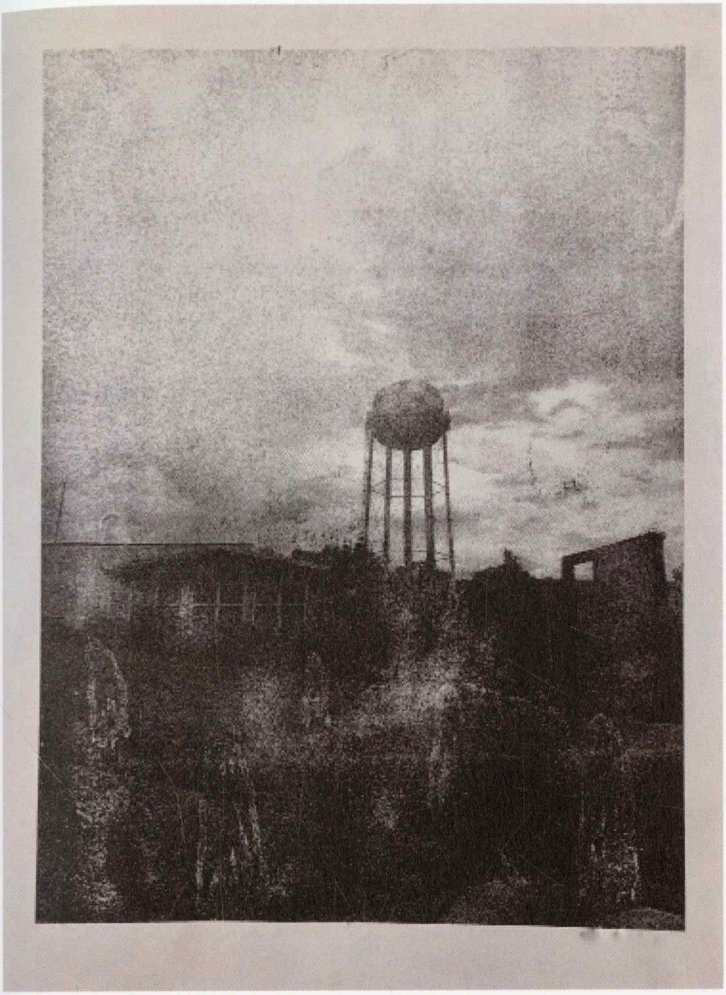
Had this just started yesterday and the days seemed so long and tiring he thought it'd been going on forever?

It didn't matter. Not anymore.

They surrounded him everywhere. They were in his once home, in every place he looked. There was never a moment he was without them, and they never wanted to be without him. Even his own bed was working against him, as they were under his bed, under his covers. His eyes too, as everytime he blinked he saw them, if only for a second. He had to hide, but where could he hide when they were everywhere?

Nowhere was safe.

The shadows gripped at him tighter.



Print 2
Victoria Green

Worm Food

Ashton Storey

I cannot wait for that day
The day I fall to earthen grave.
Where flesh and bone decline in time,
To only leave my soul behind.

I do not wish this out of sorrow
Nor fear of what will come tomorrow
It's no desire to escape
This mortal shell that holds my shape.

I believe in dirt, in clay, in stone
To make my bed, to be my home.
Because now I understand the rains,
They make me love our rotting brains.

I must walk until I'm old,
But still I have so ar to go.
When clock strikes last and only then
The cycle will begin again.

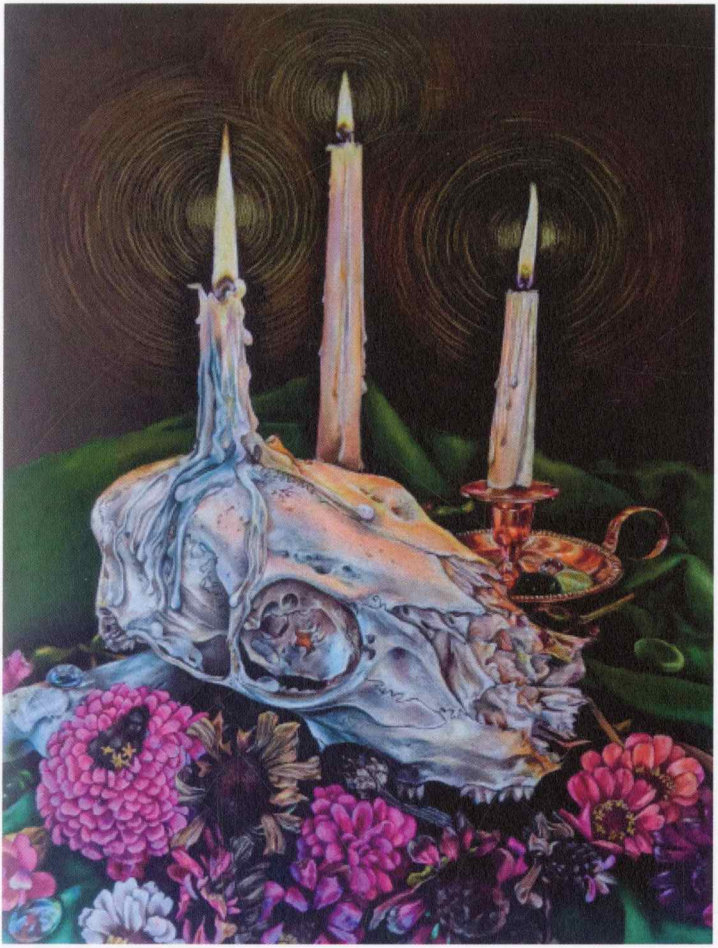
I cannot wait to fall asleep
Deep within my Mother's keep.
To feel the Earth, to feel the Flow
To know the worms will eat my toes.

Sodom and Gemorrah Run with Scissors
Ashton Storey

Life After Dying

Emma Smith

To bury my pale toes in the dirt of nostalgia is to die
A slow
Painful death.
One where you know where the body is but the door is locked.
Where the smell of decay will go straight to your brain
And you will miss everything and no one for the rest of your life.
When I died, it must have been from a paper cut.
The blood seeped out slow and sweet,
My body given to the dirt and the bugs.
If I wipe the chunked mud from my pupils, I can see the angels and devils
So vividly that I see my reflection in their disappointed pupils.
We all endure cloudy heads while Being ripped through a time warp.
Through birthdays, mother's days, mondays.
Forgetting what age means too young or what age we still believe in god.
These Sickening sensations
or who broke which tooth and sold it to fairies.
Emptying ourselves for an afterlife.
After college,
Lower me into the swamp



In Honor of Bones
Erika Lewis

Godkiller

Blaine Richardson

The sun hangs low in the sky, casting long shadows over all its light reaches. There's a small breeze rolling through the area, rustling grass and leaves, and shifting sand.

There's two levels to this little spot. On the bottom level, the beach sits with a rocky cliff overlooking it. The sand was colored as if it had seen soot instead of water. Come high tide however, and there would be no land to set foot on. The second level, on a cliff face above, was the opposite to the gray rocks and black sand that resides below it. Green fields, meadows, and bright sun that always seemed to be in the right place to show off the best features of the land. The only thing that stuck out was a tiny, rickety little shack that stood near the cliff face, with a roof beyond repair and walls held together by nothing but duct tape and bent nails. It sullied the serene scene, but not by much. Between these two levels, only a couple of rotting staircases connected them. In every other way, they were separated.

The door slams open on the shack, at first seeming as if the wind had blown it open, but instead a woman appears and props the door open with her foot. She turns around and grabs the arm of her once-husband and drags him out the door with her, letting the door close behind them and leaving a wavering trail of warm blood behind as she dragged him across the ground.

She brings him to the top of one of the staircases and gives him a quick boot down the stairs. He rolls down one, two steps before his weight stops him dead. Groaning, she follows behind him, giving him a good nudge with her foot every time he stops in front of her.

He finally rolls onto the black sand, turning it red and corrupting it. The woman lets out a sigh of relief and sits on the last step, her eyes locked on him. She wasn't done yet. He was dead, she had made sure of that- his heart was still pulsing in her coat pocket, after all- but she was paranoid that he might be able to live without one after all. So, she sat and watched, waiting for the tide to rise and finally take him away, to complete her fantasy and bring an end to a chapter of a life not even worth a footnote.

The water started to lap at his fingertips, then up to his arms, as if taste testing him before fully indulging itself. It moved up to his chest, past the hundreds (or was it thousands, the woman wondered?) of stab

wounds that marked his body, past the clean cut in the middle of his chest where she had cut out what was hers, and then it fully submerged him and dragged him to the depths.

She had done it. Her breathing intensified, her heart rate quickened. In her head, she just did the impossible. She outstretched her arms and yelled to the heavens, "GOD KILLER!" To warn whatever other God may wait for her, whether it be Zeus or Jesus Christ himself. She stood up, a smile painting her face for the first time in years, and after taking one last look at the body and watching it go further and deeper into the ocean, turned around and started her trip back up the steps, each step creaking under her weight.

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What she had failed to realize is that she wasn't a god killer, no matter how much she felt like it. She was a killer, sure, but that man she killed wasn't no God. At most, she was demigod slayer, who had finally managed to step out of the shadow of a God Killer.

As the tide started to get lower, and land started to breathe again, the coast was once more revealed to be nothing but black sand and cliff walls. No wife. No husband. No blood. In a way, it was as pristine as the fields above.

Somewhere in the depths, a finger twitches.

How We Used to Sleep

Elle Brown

Do you remember how we used to sleep?
So close.

Skin against skin;
using our bodies
as if there were no borders.

Do you remember your hands
placed deeply into my sides?
I do.

Calloused fingertips;
ever failing at concealing
your rhythmic lifeline.

Do you sleep with her that way?
Probably.
I wonder if she catches the essence
of me,
lingering on your mattress.

Do you remember that I used to be soft?
Once a borderless body now walled off.

I could still be soft;
but where roots once grew
I now feel splinters.

The Bottle

Joli

Acid plunges from a darken tulip
in a bottle that once held Powerade.
Vanilla fumes and estrogen on the lip
follows along a natural lemonade.
The droplets of blue, raped of it's abode
by yellow tides of a heavenly hip

contrived spontaneously,
synchronously abandoned.

That bottle is quite a mess, a cascade
of ingredients becomes a courtship.
In the backseat-throughout July-it laid.
The heat brought bisphenol, who had no drip.
Vanilla perfume came just like first-aid
but to no use, it smells like an old ship.

Breeded indiscriminately
Temporarily fortified

"Thee I see such an E-girl that thee likes
shall I compose a sonnet for my love?
She's already taken? well fuck my yikes!

... Can you send me nudes?"

The Simps go marching in...

I don't see the appeal.
She smells of vanilla
perfume masking a fishy meal

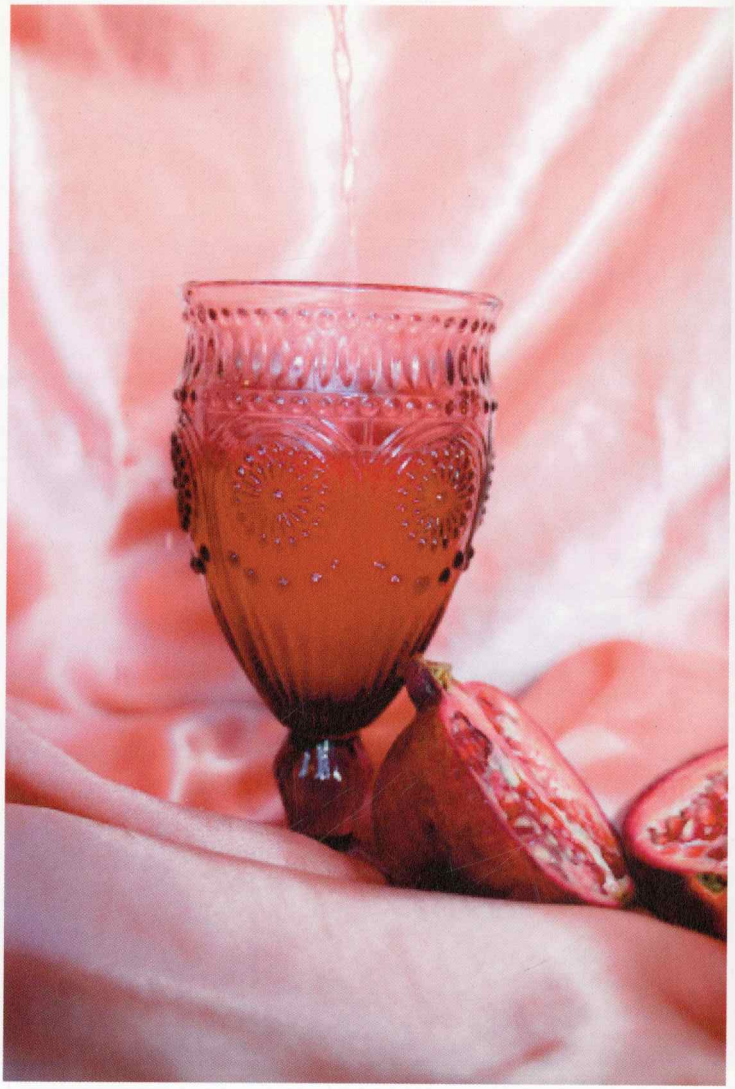
But simps don't need smell
when she's on a computer screen.
Hell,
they only see their queen.

They don't know...
I've seen it...
I've smelled it...

Do they even need to know?
As if I want to smell it-
we're in a battle of wit

So smell it...
She can't win ya know...
here we go...

...
...
...



Slip into Something Sexy
Bell Jackson

Whodunit?

Raina Verser

The answer is simple. It goes like this:

Sunday was at Kroeger's. Monday and Tuesday eloped.

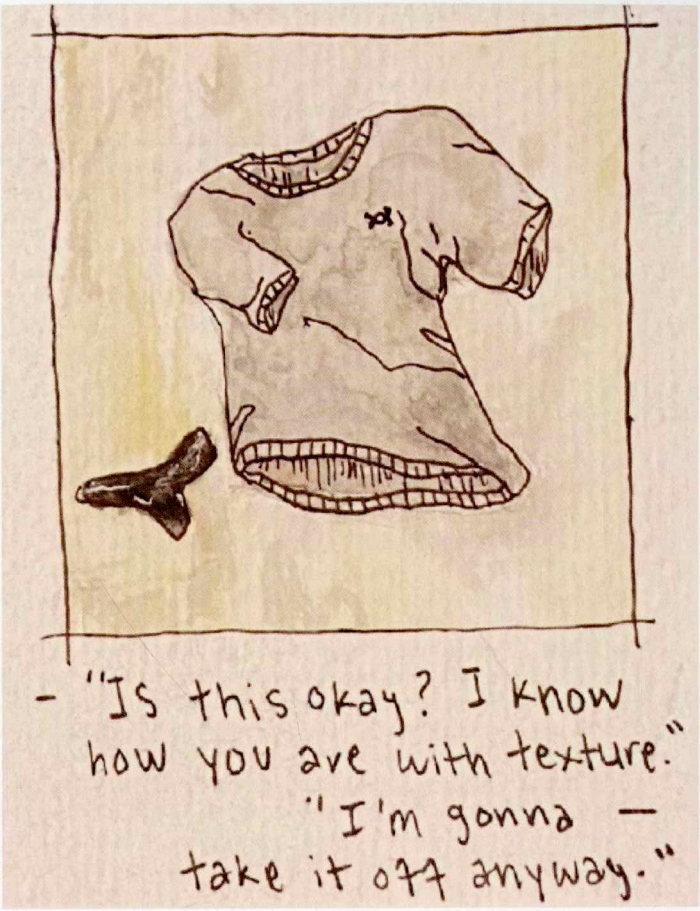
Wednesday rode I-65 into oblivion.
(or the nearest gas station.
paying obnoxious prices for regular unleaded
and pretending the fluorescents were giant,
exhausted stars was enough to make Wednesday feel alive.
almost.)

Thursday stood Friday up
and dropped the engagement ring.
(and if Friday knew that Thursday thought
that dropping the ring would be the end of it,
that was Friday's business. and if Friday often dreamed
of running—of driving, of the asphalt's cracked
and sweltering skin, of an empty passenger's side—well.
that was also Friday's business.)

So really, it could only be Saturday.
When I awoke, thrust into the arms of morning,
sweat dribbled across my brow, I'd been dreaming of you.
I could not remember what you looked like—your
eye color, whether pearls of light
dabbled across your teeth when you smiled.
Saturday's dawn birthed a memory
as blank as wonder. I had nothing. Not even
a photograph.

The answer is very simple:
Saturday stole my former lover. I will never see you again.

Lost Moments of Intimacy 1
Elle Brown



Lost Moments of Intimacy 2
Elle Brown

Influences

Celine Smith

I am tipsy, not drunk, and I hate that.

I sit on the floor in a corner because there is nowhere else for me in Tina and Mina's room. The floor has been turned into a cosmetic and clothing dumping ground. Lipsticks without the lids mark the few bits of visible carpet bloody red and flirty pink. Bangles brutalized and bent underfoot decorate the floor. Risqué tube tops and body con dresses litter the floor. The air smells of freshly straightened hair and fruity scented hair spray trying to cover up the burning stench.

It looks like the foundation of a good night filled with parties, and hot boys, and drunken hookups, and catty fights. I wished those events could occur, but sadly COVID has not ceased. The skinny silver lining is that I could get drunk on a Tuesday night while in school and show up to Zoom class with the camera off and mic muted and be counted as present. But sadly, I could not get drunk because Tina and Mina decided to scavenge and scrounge for alcohol that their parents would not miss instead of asking their older brother to buy us some. They had been too chicken shit to do it. So, there I sat in the corner of the room while Mina and Tina laughed at stupid shit that came across their phones already drunk on wine coolers. I had brought a half-spent bottle of vodka I had stolen from her parents but split between three people it did little to get me there. Especially since I had been purposely building my tolerance at home by sneaking liquor at night. Now, examining the heavy lids and permanent minute smile on the twins' faces I regretted my proactive tolerance.

"Come here, chica," Mina said, drunkenly cheery. I fought to roll my eyes, but I made my way through the maze and sat on the bed. Mina began rubbing my face, but under the influence Mina thought she was softly stroking. "What's wrong?" her bottom lip poked out as she pouted. Her straight eyebrows scrunched down from her wispy black bangs.

"Well, I wanted to get wasted and we are out of alcohol," I said, slightly pleased that I could let a little irritation ooze out of me.

"I'm sorry Clariinnaa baabbyyy," Tina slurred my name and stroked my hair. I feel like a grumpy cat. I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

"Alright then." Right then, it became obvious to me that the night was a cold corpse. "I'm gonna head out." I pressed my lips into an annoyed arrangement, slapped my thighs, and stood up.

"No, that's fine," my words came out quickly so they couldn't sense my frustration. I walked out the door and out of the house into the crisp chilled night.

The too bright nightlamps washed out and replaced the stars. I traversed the sidewalk, upset that I could walk in a straight line, a memento from the ruined night. I love Mina and Tina. We've been best friends since elementary but as we grew up it became noticeable that the twins and I have very different intentions with our high school careers. They were content to occasionally sneak wine coolers into their room and stay up all night watching Netflix. And that's fine, but...how do I say this without sounding shallow? Okay, it's not that I want to be popular. I don't know. I just want to go out and be seen and look good while being seen and have fun and get drunk, occasionally black out and forget where I'm at and piece the night together by sorting through pictures where I look undeniably irresistible. I want my legacy to begin in high school and continue till college. The only reason I really want to attend college is for the partying, not to study, because what field do I even want to major in? And not going to college is not an option, because I refuse to be known as the party girl who burnt out before she's even made it out of her teendom. But then again, none of this matters because it seems that the entire country is in a never ending pandemic.

I almost past my house. That's an easy thing to do in a neighborhood where the houses might as well be clones. My jangling keys jar me out of the silence of the night. I can feel each ridge of my key fitting into the lock sending vibrations through my bones and I am inside. I am greeted by the snores of my father which could be misinterpreted into sounds from a beast. The room's color shifts with the images cast by the giant flat screen TV. I take off my shoes, and hold them in one hand, and almost tiptoe to the liquor table in the corner next to the TV. I grab the bottle of whiskey and scurry to the kitchen. My socks slip and slide against the dark hardwood floors. I grab a tall green cup and fill it up with ice and too much whiskey, throwing together whiskey sour before heading to my room.

My room glows hot pink, a color I chose at the tender age of eight when I thought I'd always love this color. I drop my shoes, get in my bed, and take three big gulps that don't feel too nice going down. I lay down, fingers clasped across my stomach, eyes staring at the ceiling and my ankles crossed. Then I shift my eyes to the walls plastered in posters. Marilyn stares seductively in chaise next to Britney with a yellow snake draped across shoulders. Drew Barrymore flashes the crowd of the David Letterman next to Madonna in her cone shaped bra. I feel shame having

these earth-shattering women grace my walls while I live my life doing them no justice. I take another gulp of my drink and decide to do my makeup.

I try to accentuate my eye shape with black eyeshadow and enhance the icy blue of my eyes with a silver eyeshadow. The creamy pigment glides across my lid. I grace my lips with a dark bloody red. I contour my cheeks with blush paying homage to the eighties. I add a mole on the left side of my mouth and the right side of my upper cheek. When I'm done and take in the final product, I resemble a racoon more than Madonna or Marilyn. I sigh and take a sip. I roughly take off my makeup with three makeup wipes, even though I know they prematurely cause wrinkles, and lay back down in bed. My skin stings, now sensitive from the abrasive wipes. I feel a lot lower than I did with Mina and Tina earlier in the night.

I lay in bed on my phone scrolling mindlessly, my brain no longer in my head, just a thumb sliding against glass. Words and images pass through and out of my brain as quickly as they came; nothing sticks. Then a bright beacon appears in the form of a notification. A slender rectangular houses the mini sunset multicolored Instagram logo with the words:

AvaFox started a live video. Watch it before it ends!

Finally, a lifeboat appears in the sea of my despair. I quickly press the notification and am transported to Ava Fox sitting on the floor of her living room. I watch the numbers increase from tens, to hundreds, to thousands, to tens of thousands. 39,000 people tune in from different time-zones, viewers scattered across the globe. A flurry of rainbow-colored hearts burst across the left side of the screen. Comment after comment rolls in.

Hi from Germany 😊 ?

It's my birthday today <3

<3 <3 <3

What are you doing?????

Ava grabs her phone to type something quickly giving us viewers a microscopic view of her shiny forehead, which could be due to skincare products (she's sponsored by Dermalogica) or from Botox. She pins her comment to the live which simply says,

Makeup tut <3.

Ava puts the phone back so we can see her sitting crossed legged on the floor. I can tell her hair is freshly highlighted and dyed. She has the bright ashy icy blonde hair everyone is dying to get and fries and kills their hair for. But Ava's hair remains thick and healthy, which could be because she has the help of hair extensions and upper echelon hairstylists. Her eyes are hazel, a bright caramel brown, with flecks of green scattered

through. She turns her head to dig through her old makeup bag that I remember from watching all her tutorials on YouTube and on Instagram live. It has gone from a bright white with pink hearts to a dull gray, and the pink has now faded. She gives the viewers a long time to envy her razor-sharp jawline and skyscraper high cheekbones. Finally, she turns to face the mirror with Nars concealer (another sponsor) and a makeup sponge in hand. She pushes her pink lips out twisting them side to side, a little quirk of hers before she begins acknowledging the comments.

"Hello Germany...Happy Birthday Gemma...Oh, I am going to a party tonight, don't worry though. Everyone's been tested and we're gonna wear masks." What bullshit. Ava had already been under heavy fire on blogs and in her comments for being photographed at restaurants and clubs, mask-less, during the height of the pandemic. She even traveled to New York to hang out with some supermodel friends, who decided to continue their pandemic party in Mexico. Could I blame her though? Honestly, if I had the money and prime healthcare, I would be doing the same thing. Ava stops talking and does her makeup. She smears the light concealer under eyes, above her cupid's bow, her chin and then the center of her forehead. Her face ismuch paler than her synthetic golden-brown tan. She takes her dry sponge and pats and rubs the concealer. I wince as she drags instead of dabs her sponge which pulls at her skin. Ava is proof of my theory that naturally pretty girls have the worst makeup technique.

Her beauty is not at complete fault for her horrid makeup skills. Ava had not started her career as an influencer knowing how to do a full face of makeup like the new up and coming influencers today. Hell, Ava didn't even start an Instagram wanting to be an influencer. She had organically grown her platform in the early days of Instagram. I know that because I followed Ava during her genesis, when she didn't even have a thousand followers. Back when I was in middle school at the age of twelve and she was seventeen. Now I am almost her age and she can legally drink. Lucky bitch. I knew every crumb of information I could find on the internet about her. A lot of it came directly from Ava, while some came from gossip blogs.

I remember being on the Explore page on my teeny iPhone 4. I scrolled through an endless supply of aesthetic photos that showcased sunsets, pretty Starbucks drinks, the beach, stacks of books with colorful spines, and cheesy quotes. Then I saw her, which wasn't even her. It was a picture of an outfit on a coveted feminine body from the neck down, headless. The girl appeared to be sitting which accentuated the slight flare of her hips encased in black jeans. The shapely hips came into a cinched waist which was covered by a tight fitting black fuzzy sweater. Her chest broadened her figure again creating the perfect hourglass body. My preteen self thought this was the epitome of high fashion and chicness,

and I immediately followed her. While Ava only had about 400 followers, 536 people liked the photo. I watched her blossom from there. She began posting OOTDs (Outfit of the day) every day, which always placed her under the Explore tab where she was seen by thousands. By the end of the year, she had around 25,000 followers. Her post averaged around 10k likes, a rare ratio. When she hit 50k the following year she revealed her head, and everyone was shocked that she hid her beautiful heart shaped face for so long. It was like she was Cupid. My heart warmed every time she hit a milestone. I felt like a pageant mother.

Watching Ava accrue fame became an addiction for me. As the followers rolled in, so did the fashion brands, cosmetic and "health" companies. For a couple months she became a billboard and my naïve self fell for it, stealing my mother's credit card to buy makeup palettes she curated and teas that were supposed to make my bloating, which was really my organs, go away. Ava learned she didn't have to take every offer and began doing sponsor posts every now then. But it wasn't just her becoming a brand that drew me in.

Ava became a source of drama for my younger self, and I lapped up every story. About three years into becoming a full-fledged influencer, her old best friend, Natalia, created a YouTube video about what a terrible person Ava was. That Ava had stolen from their friends' house repeatedly, that she was cheating on her then boyfriend Brad, she did hard drugs, and bought her followers. Most of the rumors had little to no proof. Even Brad came forward to defend Ava. Most fans chocked it up to jealousy on Natalia's part. Some believe the rumors were true, but Ava was too pretty for them to care. The scandal made her grow even more. She hit 200k followers that year, which landed her a contract with Wilhelmina Models. Ava graduated high school and headed straight for New York Fashion Week, spreads in Vogue Magazines, and the cover of tabloids. She dumped Brad and flitted from the sexy arms of photographers, indie musicians, and up and coming artists.

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Now she is currently taking a break in Los Angeles. Unpacked boxes litter her background. Her rustling through her makeup takes me out of my reverie. It is unbelievable that this girl who I found like a gem in asphalt now has nearly 2 million followers. I have watched her grow and change. I have seen how the bridge of her nose slopes more and has become slimmer. How the lines of her lips have disappeared. How her

eyebrows are a bit higher. I imagine the discomfort of the needles pushing down and below her epidermis and deadly chemicals being injected into her skull. I imagine the bleach burning her scalp as she raised her dirty blonde hair to a brighter hue. I remember the chip of her left tooth that has now disappeared. She is now perfect.

And while I love her, I hate her. I feel like an implicit Dr. Frankenstein, (a book I did not read but SparkNoted). I do not think I made a monster, but I did create a source of envy and covetousness. I wanted to live the life I had provided for her with the countless number of likes and interactions and the multiple accounts I made to follow her page when she wanted to get a certain number of followers. I am still bitter about DMs I sent her that went answered when I was younger. She represents something I could never be, at least not now in my current state.

But I kept a list of surgeries and procedures I can get that will hopefully get me a platform as large as Ava's.

- A Brazilian butt lift to get a similar figure. Only a slight one, I do not want to end up like a Kardashian. $10k
- A breat augmentation, to complete the hourglass figure. $4k
- Buccal Fat removal so my jaw and cheekbones are emphasized. $4k
- A nose job to acheive the ski slope effect. $7k
- Lip fillers to have a natural pout. $1.2 k
- Botox to raise my eyebrows which would add more structure to my face, snatch my face back, and make my eyes more open. $1k

As Ava powders her face, a dusting of sleep sprinkles over me.

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The next morning, I doze in and out of Zoom classes, while someone uses a chisel behind my eyes and forehead. I keep the curtains closed so the room looks like the moon is still outside. My teachers are sullen and defeated as they drudge through class with no interactions from the students, who are just black screens with names. I am huddled under a mass of covers, scrolling through Ava's story, her Instagram, and Twitter. My laptop pings with a notification from my email, then another from my school page. My gut twists and dives and my head begins to pulsate. I roll over to face my laptop and lightly push the tip of my digit across the mousepad to see what the notification is about, even though I have an inkling. I click and am greeted by my digital grade book which has a 28 out of 100 for a Chemistry test I cheated on. Panic flushes my system, my palms becoming itchy with dampness I grab the trash can beside my bed and throw up. I am so screwed. My adrenaline makes my blood scorch, and my body is wracked with tremors.

The door jerks open and my mother appears, "Clarina." Her voice is low, her jaw pinched, my name coming through her locked teeth. My mother's eyes, blue like mine, are dim and tired. She wears a lilac robe I picked out for her and bought with my dad's card for one Mother's Day. Her veins jump out through her skin as she grips the doorknob. Her hair, permed curly, stands up on end as if its mad as well.

"Clarina," she begins again, softer, "why did I just get an email from a teacher saying you failed a test? You are stuck in this home twenty-five eight with nothing to do and you can't find some time to carve out for studying?"

"School is a lot harder now. It's not like I have access to my teachers for eight hours straight," my voice wavers. I am not really scared; my body is just so weak from the alcohol?"

My mother pinches her lips together, "You will find any excuse to fail. If you want to go to college, you need to make good grades. You getting a fourth of the answers right on a test is not going to cut it. You are not going to plunge this family into debt because we have to pay for your college out of our pockets. You know FAFSA gives crap aid to middle class people. You really need to—My God, what is that smell?" She looks appalled. She sees the trashcan and the green cup. She looks coolly at me. "I'm going to start marking those liquor bottles." She's been threatening that for the last couple of month but still hasn't. Now with this F, I think she'll actually start. "I asked your teacher for a retake. I expect you to get a B+ or higher. You are scheduled to take it in two days." She closes my door and leaves. The tension from my body leaves with her.

While in art class, I look over the Chemistry notes and start to cry. They make no sense to me; it might as well be Sanskrit. I scratch at the warm tears trailing down my face and shut my laptop. I get a notification for Ava's page, saying she added some photos to her story. The first picture is of her new nail set, almond shape with abstract green swirls decorating them. Golden rings with jade stones grace her slender, soft fingers. The second is a picture of a fresh pressed juice that's a vibrant pale pink color. The glass bottle sparkles and glistens in the bright LA sun. I cry even more. What did I do wrong to live this insignificant life? I might as well be a dust particle. I want to live a life of leisure where my beauty is appreciated and the things, I am surrounded by are beautiful. She uploads another picture which features a boomerang of her in front of her knew apartment. The stop motion picture shows her lifting her arms in pure joy, her new key in one hand as she jumps. I want to wear her skin and live her life. I want to experience the luxe life of Ava Fox.

Who says I can't? My apathetic dad? My purely negative mother? The virtual adults on my laptop who are supposedly teachers and authoritative figures? I grab my notebook and quickly draft a plan.

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That night while my mother is cooking and my dad is drowning himself in sports, I sneak into their bedroom. My father's wallet lays on the nightstand and I quickly slip out a credit card from its tight slot and into my pajama pocket. Next, I move to my mother's closet and grab the box hidden by winter sweaters. I rifle through it until I find my birth certificate and take that as well.

I return to my room and grab my laptop. My fingers tremor as I search for last minute tickets to Los Angeles, California. I choose one that leaves in three hours. I type in the credit card information quickly as if an alarm will go off at any moment. My stomach leaps and lurches as the confirmation email arrives in my inbox. The next part is tricky.

I go to the kitchen and lean against the island. "What do you want?" My mother is disappointed at the sight of me. She'll be fine when I'm gone. She might even secretly enjoy it when her anxiety subsides. If she has any.

"Can I spend the night at Mina and Tina's? It's not to goof off, they both got A's on the Chemistry test. They said they could help me tonight."

"Do you have to spend the night if you're just going to study?"

"Yes, the test is on four chapters." In this moment, I'm praying to Jesus that my teacher didn't give her any information on the content of test.

She exasperatedly lets out a puff of air. "Fine. But don't stay there during your classes. You're just going to distract each other."

Yes ma'am." I say as I swirl on the heel of one foot and go back to my room before she changes her mind. I pack nonsensically, not knowing how long I'll be able to stay before the jig is up. My body thrums with energy and adrenaline. And I cannot believe I am about to do this. I am still in the earliest stages of the plan, and one little thing could make it all crumble.

I double check all the things I need. I walk to Mina and Tina's house because that is where I told the Uber driver to arrive. "Hi," I squeak.

***

How does a teenage girl get on a plane without her parents knowing? She bribes an Uber driver to pretend to be her dad. Not saying that's what I did, but I am currently sailing a few miles high in the sky. I am oddly calm at this moment. I have accepted whatever fate lies in front of me whether it be missing person searches, a squad of police cars waiting for me at the LAX, or even the plane crashing. Not even the mask I have to wear for the entirety of the flight dampens my mood. I

watch the night slowly churn out the colors of the day all pale gray and blue. It is so beautiful up here.

When I land, I get another Uber and have him to take me to the fresh pressed juice brewery that Ava was at yesterday. I found the address by searching the business up. Ava was nice enough to @ the place. On Ava's Instagram story, she appeared to be walking, so her apartment couldn't be that far away. I took screenshots of her story so I could compare the scenery while I walk.

In the car, I am stunned by Los Angeles. It always seemed like a magical, ultra-exclusive land only celebrities had access too. Not little ole me. The sky, which is solidly blue tricks me into thinking that if I get high enough, I could touch it. We pass by palm trees, a species I have never seen in real life. Rich women tote Louis Vuitton bags under one hand and their mini dogs under the other. The sun is ceaseless. All the elements of nature, the brightness, the perfect temperature, the cloudless sky seem curated so everyone can have a great experience. I feel sad that my trip will probably end abruptly, otherwise I would take in the sites. I need to see my idol's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, take in the Hollywood sign mounted in those luscious green hills, visit Rodeo Drive, and find the least expensive item in a luxury store to buy. But all of that must wait. My time is now dedicated to Ava.

The car drops me off at the juice shop and I indulge myself by getting a drink before I make my trek. I show them the picture Ava posted and sip on that. To know that Ava and I have drank the same libation intoxicates me. I have a little slice of her life, the life I have yearned over for years. I take small sips as I stroll down the sidewalk, looking at the pictures for hints on where I could find Ava's apartment. I know I am headed in the right direction because I see the same cream painted asphalt wall with the greenery above it that Ava used for the background of her new nail set. I am so elated, the fact that I haven't eaten in ten hours does nothing to hinder me. My heart gallops at the prospect of being so close to her, to be walking the same streets she has. I can feel the essence she left behind.

I am so euphoric I almost miss the building that's a dead match for hers. The building looks like an incomplete Jenga tower made out of cement. The different floors alternate between black-gray and orange with metal accents. The exterior doesn't fit Ava at all, but I can tell the interior will be nice because it's a newer building. I walk in and notice the keypads on the doors in the sterile lobby.

"May I help you?" the skeptical look on the man's face dimmed my mood. I realize I look like a bummy sixteen-year-old, slightly rank from the flight, and sweaty and worn looking from my walk in the warm sun.

I console myself and will this interaction to go as planned. "Hi. My name

is Katie, I am interviewing Ava Fox for a school paper. She told me to ask you for the code of her apartment."

He scrunches his eyebrows, not taking my bull. "She is supposed to give you the code. I cannot let you in her apartment."

I feign my best look of confusion. "Oh. That's so weird. She told me you would have to let me in. Maybe she forgot to tell you or something."

Somehow his eyebrows scrunch even more making his eyes disappear. He could use a brow lift as well. "That's not our guest policy.

"Well could you make an exception? How else could I know she lives here if she didn't invite me?" My core tightens as he dips into a silence.

"Why don't you call her?"

"I just did. She told me to do what I'm doing right now."

He sighs. "C'mon," he barks.

***

I am in Ava's apartment, which honestly could be heaven. The walls and floor are dark finely milled cement. It is an open concept apartment. No wall divides the kitchen and the living room. The décor is definitely minimalistic. The cabinets' handles and seams are almost imperceptible. Instead of the traditional wood, white plastic is used. The fridge has a touch screen. A huge island is present accompanied with four uncomfortable but stylish looking highchairs. I help myself to some of her wine when the doorman leaves. An expensive Pinot Grigio. Ava has a nice white retro couch shaped like a squiggle. It's cute, but not comfortable. I inspect her things while casually sipping from the wine bottle. The mirror she used to do her makeup in sits against the wall. I can imagine her there easily. Since her Instagram live, most of her things have been unpacked. I am not worried about time because Ava is currently at a photoshoot which she posted about earlier.

Her bed is huge with hotel sheets. I cannot wait to take a dive, but I don't want to be disrespectful, so I take a shower as to not soil her sheets. The pressure in her shower is amazing, and if I didn't want to do anymore digging, I could have stayed there for an hour. Afterwards I wrap myself into a cotton candy soft white robe. I wash my face with her expensive skin care. I even do her skin regimen I had memorized from her YouTube channel. My face looks rejuvenated, and I smile at myself in the mirror. This is pure bliss. I do not want to go back.

I lay in her bed and the foam accepts me like an old friend. Ava Fox lives the life. I swish my legs back and forth feeling the cool sheets against my skin. I can smell the lavender spray she swears calms her down and soothes her at night. I get up and find the bottle in the

room and spray it myself. I decide I am too jittery to lay down in her bed. There's too much to explore. I go to her huge walk-in closet, which is as big as my room and finger the luxury brands. Gucci, Balmain, Prada, Celine, Moschino. I pull out pieces playing a game with myself, seeing if I can remember the specific Instagram post and outfit she made with each article of clothing.

While gazing through her sweaters, I find the sweater. The one I discovered her in. I check the tag and it reads Wild Fable. The outfit that started it all came from Target. I quickly put it on and start crying. I dig through three drawers until I find the skinny jeans she wore. I look at myself in her full-length mirror and sob. I go to the couch to recreate the posed sitting and snap a quick picture to cherish forever. Her house becomes a game for me. I try to find items like books, makeup, or snacks featured on her social medias.

My heart jolts every time I find another miscellaneous item, my mind conjuring up the video or photo it's in, becoming so happy that all this is real. They always try to tell you the lives of influencers' aren't real. That their bodies are not that perfect, their skin isn't flawless, their clothing or bags are knockoffs. They try to tell you, life isn't perfect or the way it is portrayed online, but at least they have the resources to make it seem like their life is perfect.

One item that is hard to find is her laptop. I scour every nook and cranny in search of it. Then an interview pops into my brain. Her pretty blonde headed self giggling and saying, "Yeah it's a bad habit, but I sleep with my laptop." I immediately go back to her bedroom and look under her pillow and voila, there it is. I try her password three times before getting it right. Her birthday and birthtime with no spaces. There is only one thing I want to do.

I go to Instagram and luckily, she is already signed in. I click followers, type in my username. My phone buzzes. I screenshot the notification.

Ava Fox (@AvaFox) has requested to follow you.

I accept.

Untitled
Kamden Marshall

The Idea of Not Knowing
Elle Brown

The Idea of Not Knowing

Elle Brown

I fell in love with the idea of you not knowing

what my room looked like anymore.

I rearranged and redecorated

at 2 in the morning

taking care not to wake my family

lest they caught me doing it.
It felt like a robbery.

You knew so much about me

but you would not know this.

I imagined the look on your face

if you were to walk in and see it,
In a perfect world you'd remember

a passing conversation in which I had spoken

my distaste for in-corner-of-room beds

citing the feeling of them being "juvenile,"

you asked if I was too grown for corner beds
And in that comment, of course you unknowing,

it was then I had taken notice of the notion,

the hypocrisy in denying myself practically.

And at 2 AM, I knew putting my bed

in the corner of the room

was something you'd never see coming.

Your Car

Meredith Mosley

I drove past your old car today
It was broken down in the grass
I almost stopped to take a look
But I turned my head and let it pass

My mirrors showed me every detail
Every scratch and dent were as clear as day
The longer I looked, the faster I drove
And the further your car slipped away

But your voice came over the radio
And you began to sing for me
I couldn't bear to turn it off
So I drove, and I let you sing

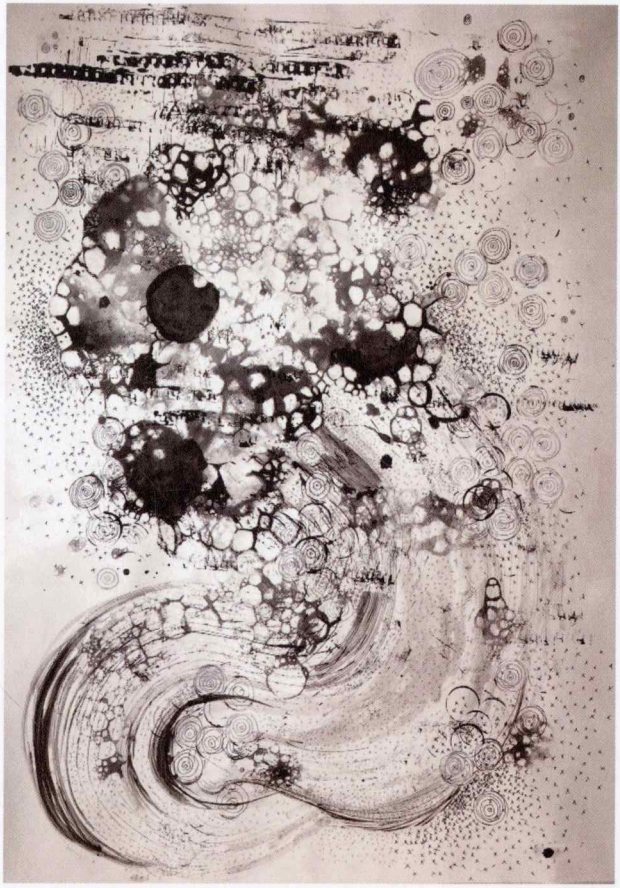
I rolled down my window for fresh air
But your cigarette smoke traveled in
It rolled across the steering wheel
And wrapped around my skin

I took a deep breath through my nose
And I smelt your cheap cologne
I closed my eyes, and just for a moment,
I was no longer alone

I drove through every red light in town
I watched the sun set and the sky fade from blue
I drove for hours and hours without stopping
I drove while I was still with you

As the stars came out, I came to a stop
My car had run out of gas
Your voice, your smoke, your wonderful scent
They disappeared through the glass

I sat alone in the darkness
And I wiped away my tears
I sat trapped in my seat, unable to breathe
You were never really here



Stability in Disorder
Natalie Henderson

My Mama

Skylar Bailey

My mama was raped.

She was a freshman in high school. Her time was spent hanging out with her friends, playing softball, studying for tests, and learning who she was.

He was a middle-aged man teaching geometry and coaching track at a high school in Florida. His time was spent talking to students, hosting parties for the track team, and watching teenage girls walk down the hallways.

It was a normal day at school. My mama went to geometry class, as she did every day. She completed her class work, talked with friends, and probably flirted with a boy or two. The bell rang, and while the other students gathered their things and loitered in the hallways before their next class, my mama was asked to stay behind for a 'quick chat'.

He told her of the track team's success at the previous meet, which had taken place the night before. He planned a party to celebrate, and he wanted my mama to celebrate with him. All the best students were going to be there, and he considered her to be one of the best.

Being one of the best was enough for my mama.

The last bell of the day rang, and my mama was the first one out of her desk. With his address smeared across her hand, she let her excitement lead her to his house, the first student to arrive. She knew she was early, but her fist was rapping on his front door before she could stop herself. He opened the door and welcomed her in with a smile, a smile that told her, You're important to me! She strutted inside with a smile of her own, a smile that that told him, I'll do anything to feel wanted! If only they had communicated properly, she would've understood that their definitions of 'want' were not the same.

I know this won't seems true, but my mama was not a stupid girl. Yes, she did sit on his couch, believing that he was only setting up refreshments, and that her friends would soon join her at the party. However, it only took a few moments for her to realize that she was not the first student to arrive at his house, but maybe the only student to arrive at his house.

Despite his reassuring promises of a full house, of an evening

laced with laughter, a celebration worth remembering, my mama got nervous. Her excitement was soon overrun by fear, and she began mapping out possible escape routes. She was stuck in her own head, but a loud 'click' forced my mama back into reality. Locking the door wasn't something you always did back in the 90's, not unless you were trying to keep the world out and trying to keep something inside. Her body froze, and her breathing quickened, as she knew all her escape routes had been blocked.

Within an hour, my mama went from being a teenage girl, desperate for some validation, to prey, desperate to escape the chokehold of a predator she trusted.

I'll spare you the gory details, as my mama did with me. You may be asking yourself, What mother would tell her daughter something so horrific? Why would your child want to know all of this? My mama told me her story because I felt unsafe myself one day.

I thought I was being followed.

It was the summer before my sophomore year of high school. My time was spent talking to my friends over the phone, listening to music, creating as much art as I could manage, and taking care of my great-grandmother and myself.

He was an older man, probably between his fifties and sixties. I'm not sure how his time was spent, where he was in his life, of if he was even dangerous. I didn't even know this man's name.

It was a normal summer afternoon in Alabama. I was in the local Walmart, waiting for my grandmother's prescription to be filled. The wait was fifteen to twenty minutes, time I chose to spend looking at hair dye and texting my mama. I spoke to nobody, and nobody spoke to me.

He walked by the aisle I was standing in. We made eye contact and waved to one another, as people do. I continued with my mission, taking photos of every box I saw so my mama could pick her favorite color.

A few minutes later, the same man who waved to me was on the other side of my aisle, examining the various curling irons on the shelf behind me. I thought nothing of it at first. Sure, he had no hair to curl, but he could've been shopping for a friend, a daughter, or maybe his own mother.

He looked away and picked up an iron, turning it in his hands as if he was genuinely interested in it. I became nervous, but decided that he was not an immediate threat, and retuned to my hair dye mission.

When he had not left a few moments later, I decided to examine the situation further. I turned my head again and found him staring at me like he was before, only he was standing a few feet closer.

I snapped my head back quickly this time in order to avoid direct eye contact. My heart began to race, and my hands began to shake, but I

told myself that he was simply shopping. I reminded myself that although I was afraid of a lot of things, I did not have to be afraid of a man shopping in Walmart.

My phone died, and I decided it was a sign for me to spend time in a different aisle. I turned my head one more time before leaving the aisle.

There he was, right behind me, staring me up and down like a piece of meat.

My feet were moving quicker than my mind. My breath was spurring out in hot rapid puffs, loud enough for me to hear it. I turned around to see if he was still as close as he felt, but I couldn't find him. Fear had taken over, and I couldn't fight back.

I continued speed walking until I discovered the back-to-school section, which was in the front of the store, right in the middle of everything. I went up and down each aisle until I found a vacant one. I made it my safe space. I caught my breath and calmed my nerves. Even in the peace, my mind was running all over the place, taking me to every possible ending of that story.

Within an hour I went from being a teenage girl stuck in a car with her overbearing grandmother to prey, stuck in the fear of being swallowed whole by a lustful predator.

My mama could never escape her teacher. Messages asking for a lingerie model and another good time appeared on her computer almost nightly. She sat through his class every day, unable to hide from his subtle grins and hidden winks.

My mama kept it all a secret. She avoided her parents after that, not wanting her shame to spill the dirty details.

But secrets can only stay hidden for so long.

It was over a year before he was discovered. One night, her own mother used her computer to research a new recipe. She was clicking around when a strange message appeared in the corner of the screen.

Within that year, he had raped two more girls, both younger than my mama. He went to prison on three charges of rape of a minor. He was released in 2017.

My mama still couldn't escape him. His arrest made headlines, and while my mama's name was never mentioned, her classmates figured out who was involved and how. She lost most of her friends, and her relationship with her own mother was obliterated within days. She moved to Alabama with her father for a fresh start.

I never really feel like I've escaped the man from Walmart. We haven't come across one another in years, and I don't believe we ever will. Honestly, picking him out in a crowd would be a challenge for me. He is a nameless, faceless man.

But over the years, I have seen that unrecognizable face many times. I have seen him in the faces of guys my age, whispering dirty thoughts about me across town and trying to 'sneak a peak' or 'cop a feel' without my consent. I have seen him in the faces of my friends, his eyes filled with their tears after being sexually assaulted by strangers, significant others, or even family. I saw him in the face of a man my first semester of college, a man who fed me liquor until I was too delirious to realize he was touching me. Thank god for the men who cared, and who got me out of that situation before it could escalate any further.

That summer day, after retrieving my grandmother's prescription and running out of the store, I told her of the man who followed me. She listened to every word, nodding her head and sighing. When I finished my story, she told me, "It's something you need to get used to. You have your mama's body, you can't wear shorts or tight shirts and not expect to get attention."

I've carried those words with me for almost five years. Those words that doomed me to eternal fear, shame, confusion, they never left me.

I've learned a lot since that day. The thought of being followed in a grocery store is now nothing compared to what I have seen and experienced. I still have my mama's body, the body that a predator wanted so badly he forced her to give it to him. I often feel that I am awaiting the day I will experience what so many of my friends have, what my mama experienced.

As a woman, I have been taught how to live. I have been told that my body will be seen as an object, and that it is my job to hide it away under baggy clothes. I now carry an alarm and pepper spray at all times. I keep my eyes open when I am in public, always watching for a predator hiding in the bushes. As a woman, and as most women are, I was taught that I was prey, and it was my job to ensure I was not attacked by a predator.

Almost any woman you ask about sexual harassment or assault will have a story to tell, whether it is one of her own or that of a loved one's. However, this does not just impact women. Men can just as easily be prey. Non-binary people can be prey. Anyone can be prey. We are so busy teaching young girls that their bodies are provocative that we have neglected to teach everyone, no matter their gender, the importance of respect for others.

So no, I will not cover my body because you were not taught to respect me. I will not hide away in my bed at night to keep myself safe. I will cautiously go into the world, living as much of a life as I can manage with this weight that has been set upon me. My body is mine, and I will not let your twisted view of it bring me shame any longer. I will empower those who have been silenced by your wicked hands. I will stand beside them and remind them that they are not prey, they are people.

Just as I wish someone had done for my mama.

Suicidal Altruism

Noah Wortham

Justification and conviction

Assured of your position

You think it's for others but
it's for yourself

Self-destructive

Reconstructed

Self-destructive altruism

Martyr without a heart

Memory without...

A play without a part

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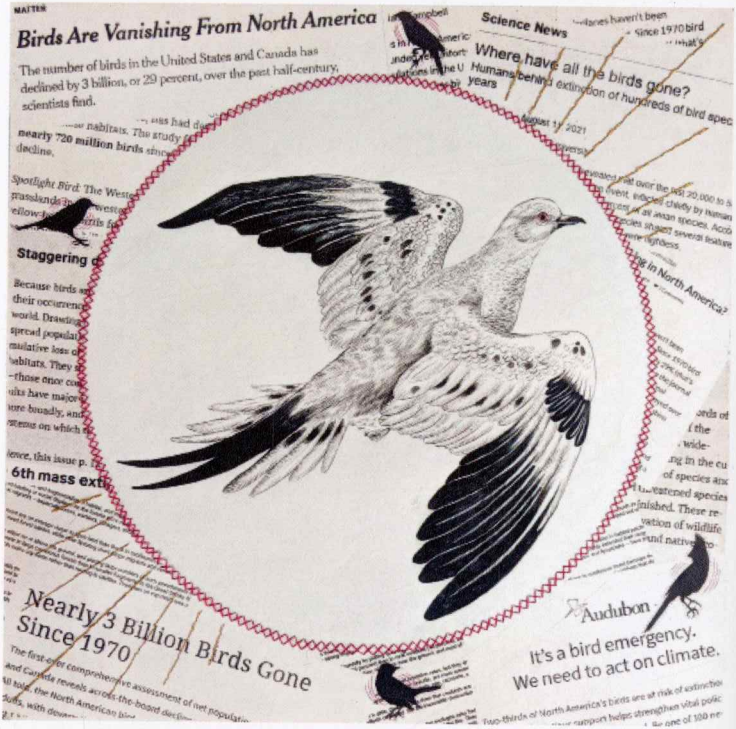
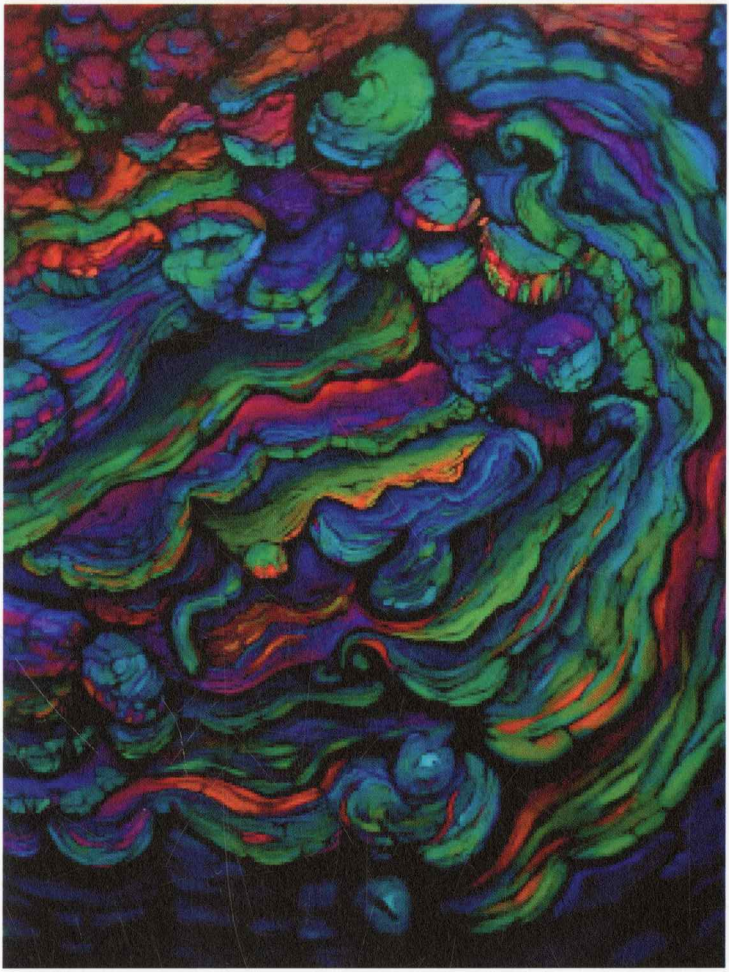
Flying Fish
Silas Fleming

Cow
Kamden Marshall


Birds Are Vanishing From North America
Science News
Where have all the birds gone?
Nearly 3 Billion Birds Gone Since 1970
Audubon
It's a bird emergency.
We need to act on climate.

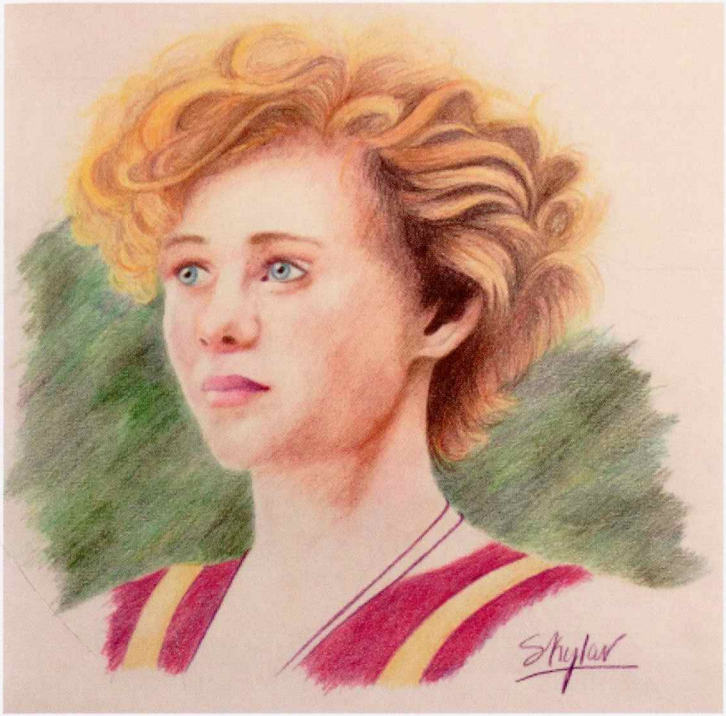
You Are Missed

Erika Lewis

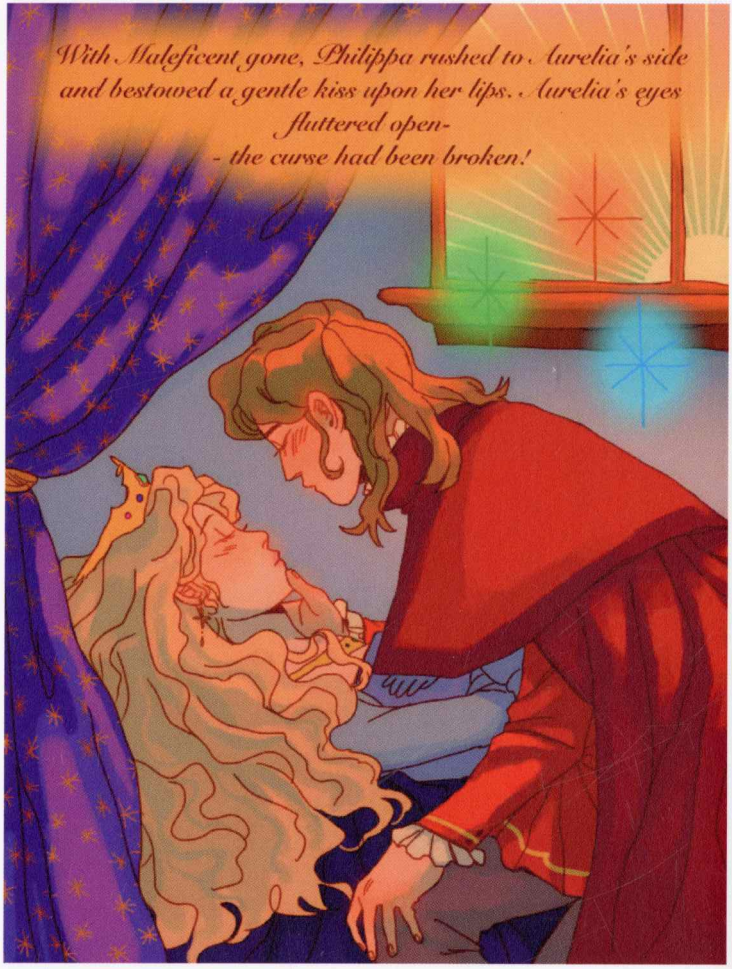


Crackle
Maddi Evett

Magic of Pegasus
Silas Fleming

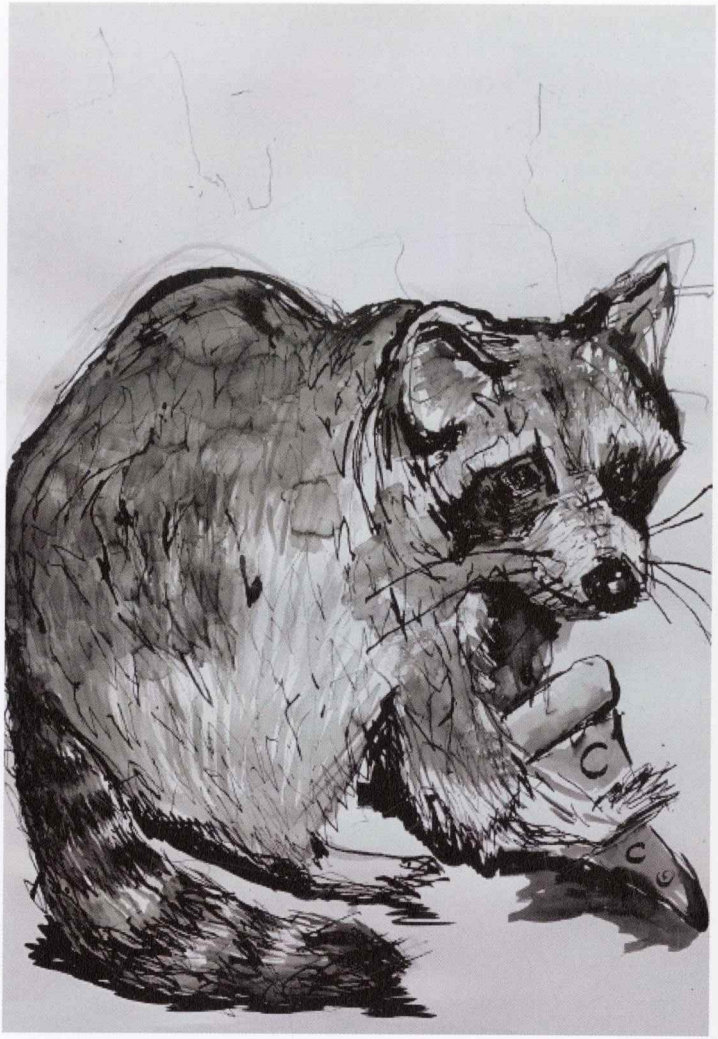


Beverley
Skylar Bailey


With Maleficent gone, Philippa rushed to Aurelia's side
and bestowed a gentle kiss upon her lips. Aurelia's eyes
fluttered open-
- the curse had been broken!

Sleeping Beauty
Silas Fleming

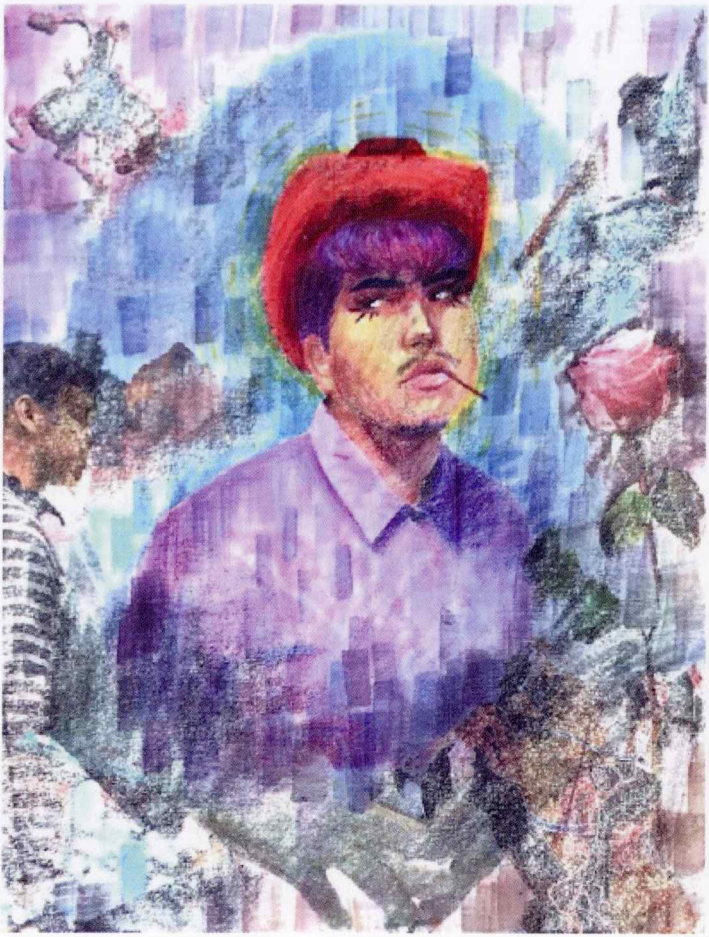
Til Death Do Us Part
Nathan Mize



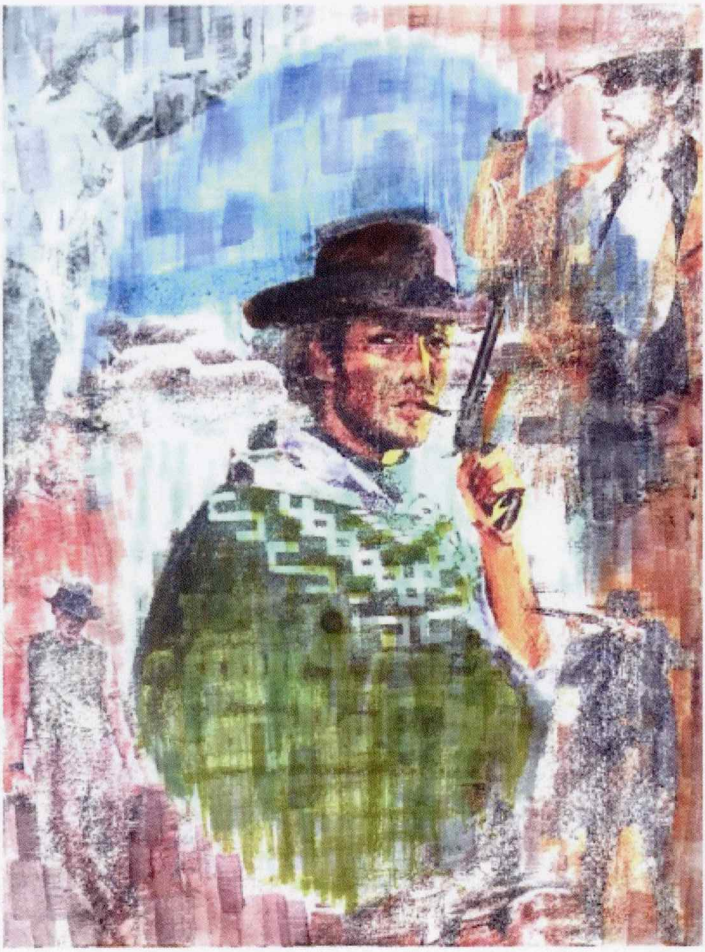
Racoon
Kamden Marshall

Gel

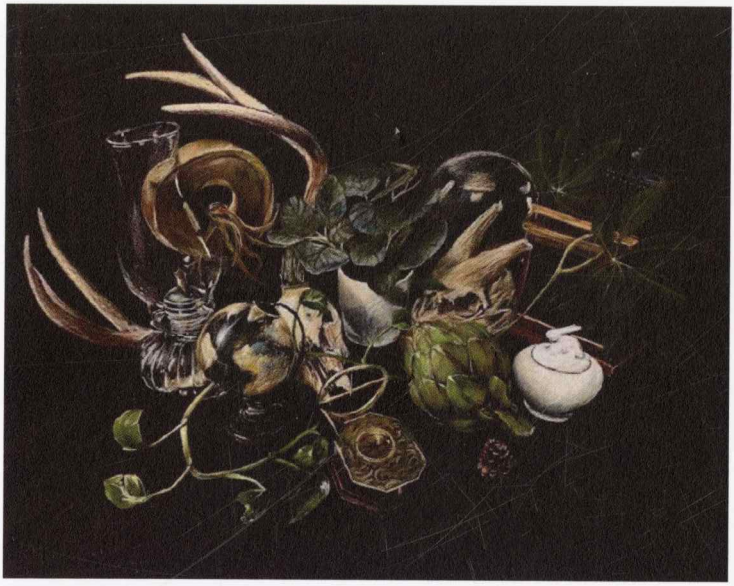
Arabella Cortes



Be the Cowboy 1
Isaac Barrientos

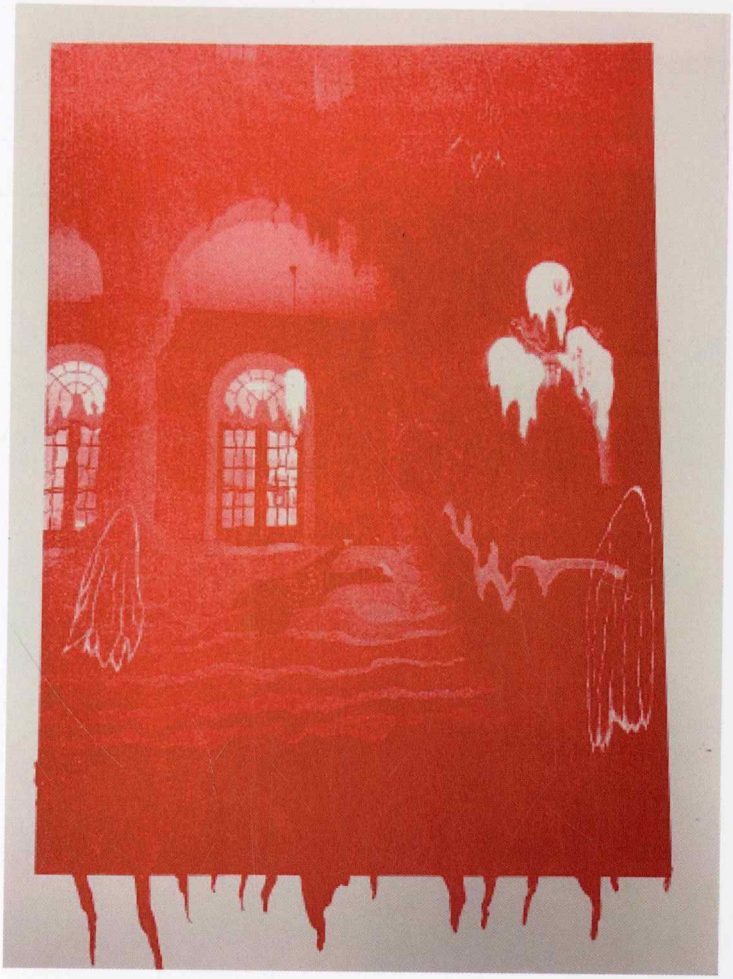


Be the Cowboy 2
Isaac Barrientos

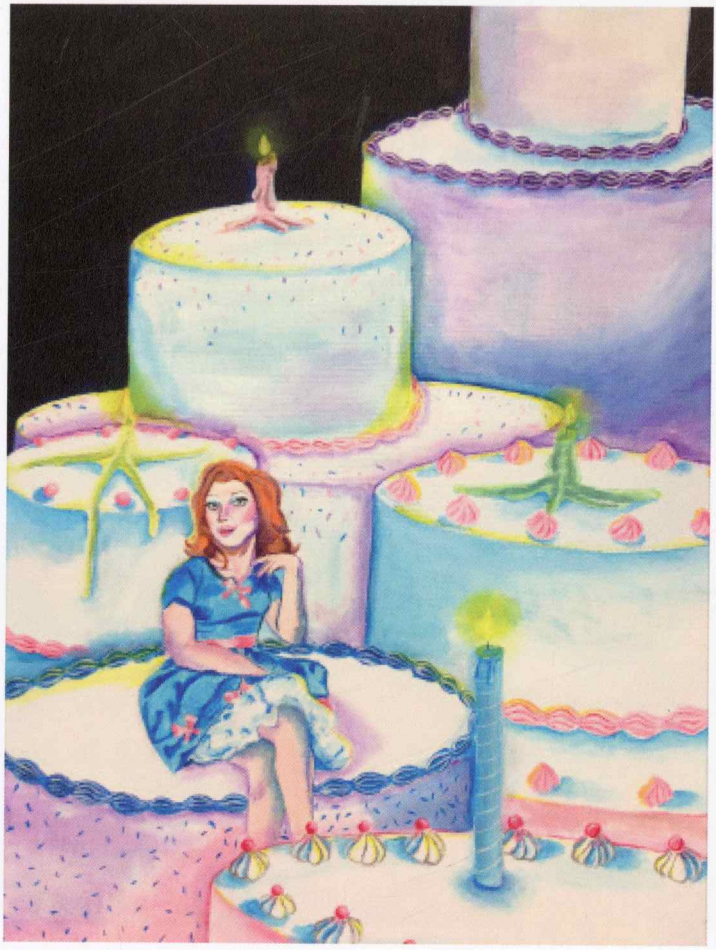


Commemoration of Life

Natalie Henderson

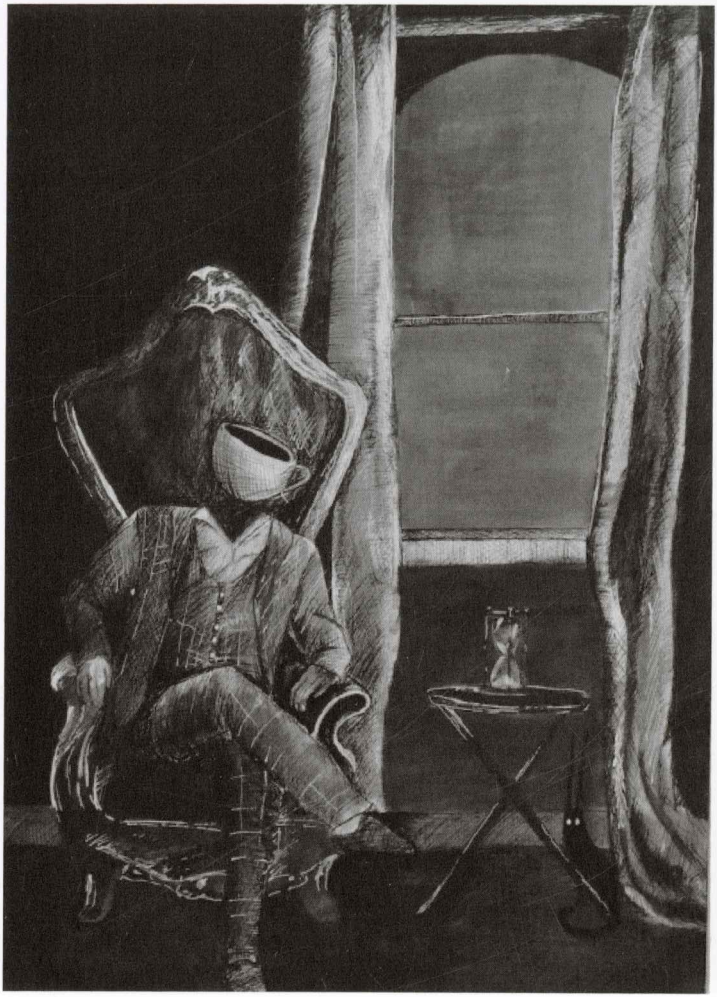


Print 1
Victoria Green

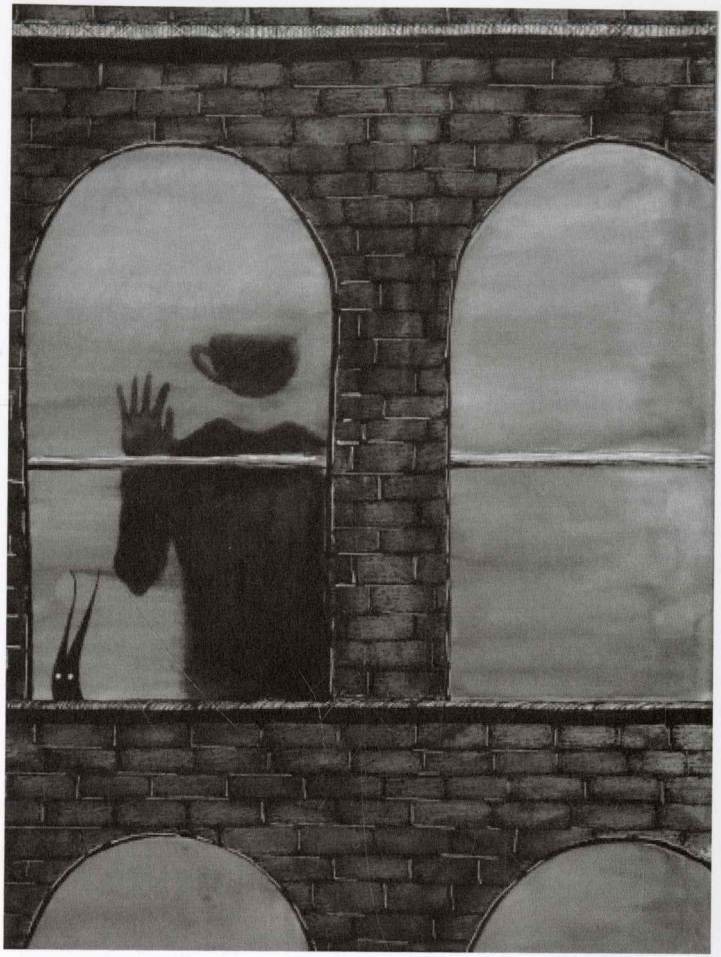


The Cake I Had
Natahn Mize

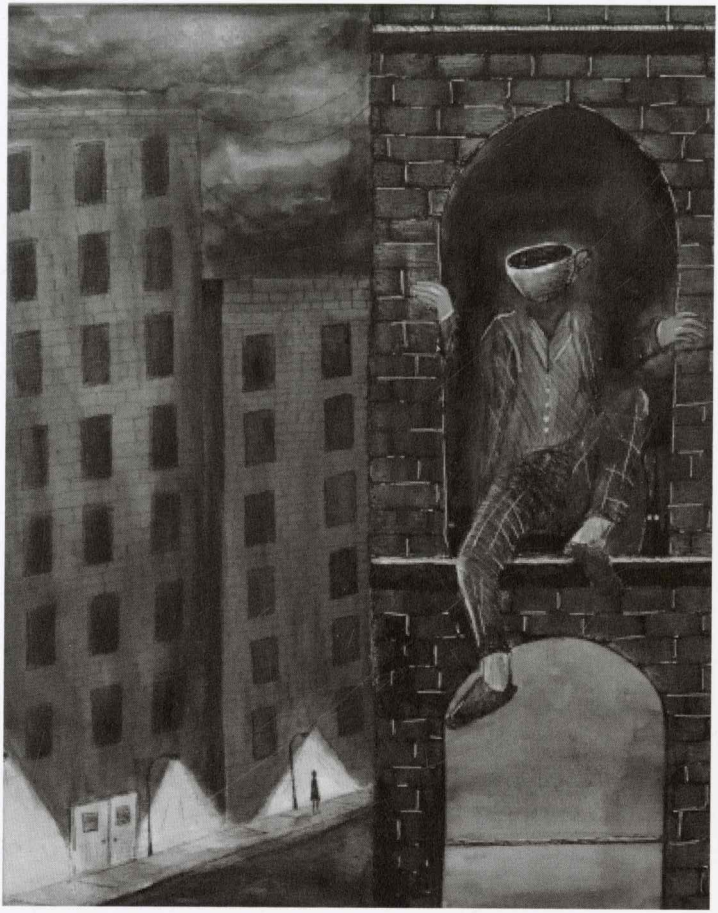
Chromatic Crows
Erika Lewis



Prey On Your Mind
Natalie Henderson



Restlessness
Natalie Henderson



Drowse of Momentum
Natalie Henderson

3 of Swords
Isabella Ziglar

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